Beyond Shelter: The Power of Women Stepping into Connection

Women Survivors of Intimate Partner Violence Experiences in an Arts-Based Mindfulness Group Program

by

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Abstract

Meeting the needs of women survivors of intimate partner violence (IPV), that seek emergency shelters across Canada is a persistent concern in shelters across the country as women are experiencing high rates of stress-related challenges after feeling abuse such as post-traumatic stress (PTSD), anxiety and depression. The annual national report of YWCA Canada acknowledges that women's shelters require innovative, cost-effective supports that use a trauma-informed perspective to meet the diverse needs of their residents. They propose VAW shelters collaborate with local and provincial agencies to develop effective solutions and implement best practices that can empower women. My research study explored the suitability and effectiveness of an innovative mindfulness-based intervention (MBIs) called the Holistic Arts-Based Program (HAP) to teach mindfulness skills to women survivors of intimate partner violence (IPV), living in an emergency shelter. Arts-based methods are enjoyable and engaging, and enable individuals to express feelings/thoughts that might otherwise be difficult to elicit; this information is rich and interesting, even powerful. Results of qualitative thematic analysis of pre- and post-group group interviews led to the development of three main themes: (1) benefits of learning mindfulness skills and concepts, (2) benefits of arts-based experimental methods, and (3) benefits of strength-based group work. Participation in HAP helped women survivors mitigate the negative impacts of stress, and taught them mindfulness concepts and activities that they were inspired to use in their own lives and introduce them to their children. My research demonstrates how interventions such as the HAP could make a difference in women's mental health. As MBIs may not have universal appeal they should not be a mandatory program requirement, but consideration may be given to offer mindfulness interventions to empower women survivors of IPV in emergency shelters.

Keywords: mindfulness, women survivors of intimate partner violence (IPV), violence against women (VAW), trauma, women shelters, posttraumatic growth, arts-based, group work.

Résume

Répondre aux besoins des femmes victimes de violence de violence conjugale qui cherchent des abris d'urgence au Canada est une inquiétude persistante dans le pays, puisque les femmes rencontrent des taux élevés de problèmes liés au stress après avoir vécu l'abus telles que de troubles posttraumatiques, l'anxiété et la dépression. Le rapport annuel du YWCA Canada reconnait que les femmes victimes de violence ont besoin d'appuis innovateurs et lucratifs qui utilisent une pratique tenant compte des traumatismes en santé mentale et en toxicomanie pour répondre aux divers besoins de leurs résidents. Ils proposent que les maisons d'hébergement pour les femmes collaborent avec des agences locales et provinciales pour développer des solutions efficaces et mettre en œuvre les meilleures pratiques permettant aux femmes de s'émanciper. Ma recherche explore la pertinence et l'efficacité d'une intervention novatrice fondée sur la pleine conscience qui s'intitule le programme holistique basé sur les arts. Ce dernier vise à enseigner des aptitudes de pleine conscience aux femmes victimes de violence conjugale qui vivent dans une maison d'hébergement. Ces méthodes basées sur les arts sont plaisantes et exaltantes et elles permettent aux personnes d'exprimer des sentiments, des pensées qui sans elles n'auraient pas vu le jour. Ce qui en ressort est riche, intéressant voire profond. Les résultats des analyses thématiques qualitatives avant et après les entretiens de groupe nous conduisent à mettre trois thèmes en lumière : 1) avantages d'apprendre les concepts et activités de pleine conscience 2) avantages des méthodes basées sur les arts et 3) avantages du travail de groupe fondée sure les forces. La participation des femmes au programme holistique basé sur les arts a contribué à atténuer les effets négatifs du stress et leur a appris les concepts et les activités liés à la pleine conscience, concepts et activités qu'ils ont pu introduire à leurs enfants. Ma recherche montre comment les interventions telles que le programme holistique basé sur les arts peuvent améliorer grandement la santé mentale de l'étudiant. Je reconnais que les interventions basées sur la pleine

conscience ne sont pas nécessairement pour tout le monde et, de fait, elles ne devraient pas être une exigence obligatoire du programme, mais il pourrait être envisagé d'offrir des interventions de pleine conscience pour renforcer le pouvoir des femmes victimes de la violence conjugale dans les maison d'hébergement.

Mots-clés : pleine conscience, femmes victimes de violence conjugale, la violence faites aux femmes, maisons d'hébergement traumatisme, croissance post-traumatique, activités artistiques, travail de groupe fondée sure les forces.

Dedication

This is for every woman who ever survived abuse. Your stories empower others, they matter, you matter.

To the 14 women who participated in my study;

you are strong, intelligent, resilient, important, and powerful beyond measure.

This research would have not been possible without you.

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You can't heal what you never reveal.

- Jay Z
- Chantal McMahon

With this research opportunity, I wanted to do something meaningful for the strongest most courageous women I knew. I wanted to offer women survivors of IPV, living in our local emergency shelter something more. This research allowed me to accomplish this goal. Although, challenging at times, this has been the most fulfilling work I've had the opportunity to do as a social worker thus far. I hope each woman who participated in my study knows how much of an impact their voices, strength, and vulnerability had on us as facilitators. Personally, your presence and engagement in this program has shaped me into the person I am and the lawyer I will become.

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Introduction

As research exploring mindfulness-based interventions (MBIs) increases, studies implementing MBIs with women survivors remain sparse. My study examined the delivery of an arts-based MBI with a small group of women survivors of abuse living in a local emergency shelter in a Northeastern Ontario context. An arts-based MBI delivered as a prevention and promotion strategy was studied as a possible method of providing additional support for the growing complex needs of women residing in emergency shelters.

Background of the Problem

Violence against women (VAW) is a collection of violent acts that are primarily or exclusively committed against women and girls expressly because they are female (Russo & Pirlott, 2006). A resolution of the United Nations of the General Assembly adopted the Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women (DEVAW) in 1993. DEVAW states, “violence against women is a manifestation of historically unequal power relations between men and women" and "violence against women is one of the crucial social mechanisms by which women are forced into a subordinate position compared with men” (UN, 2016, p. 3). VAW is a public health and social problem across both developed and developing nations (WHO, 2017). According to the United Nations (UN) (2016), “there is no region of the world, no country and no culture in which women's freedom from violence has been secured” (p.9).

Today, much work remains to be done to prevent the violence that persists in both the public and private spheres of women's lives. Violence against women significantly impacts women's mental health and emotional wellbeing (Brennan, 2011). In Canada, the most common forms of VAW are physical abuse, sexual abuse, emotional or verbal abuse, financial abuse,

psychological abuse, spiritual abuse, and criminal harassment and stalking [Status of Women Canada (SWC), 2016].

Prevailing theories of violence against women are defined on two different levels, individual and societal. The psychodynamic perspective and the developmental perspective are representative of individual approaches while the feminist perspective and the family violence perspective are representative of sociological theories. The psychodynamic perspective suggests that women who were abused or witnessed abuse as children are likely to develop personalities that are dysfunctional due to “over-identification” (Rakovec-Felser, 2014, p.63). From this exposure, women learn violence and search for violent adult partners to repeat this abuse.

The development perspective suggests that the roots of abuse lie in society and the societal devaluation of women and girls. Moreover, one must understand the importance of resisting the "internalization of this devaluation" and "creating a caring, valuing environment to improve women's self-images" (Becker, 2008, p. 26). On the other hand, the sociological perspective focuses on the societal and cultural norms and values (Straus, Gelles, & Steinmetz, 2017), highlighting the importance of power, control, and societal factors on individuals. Correspondingly, the feminist perspective emphasizes "deeply rooted sexism" as a significant contributor to women's positions in life, where abuse seems "inevitable" (Yodanis, 2004, p. 656). Notably, feminist theorists have criticized the individual perspective because it tends to ignore the environmental factors that come into play, and blames the women for the abuse she experienced.

In Canada, women were not considered “persons” until 1929 and were deemed unimportant and unprotected under any law (Tutty, 2006, p.25). As the years went by, research in Canada emerged, stating the severe nature of the abuse of women. Despite this new wealth of

knowledge, North American societies were caught off-guard, and feminists received incredible cynicism. People did not talk about VAW and of course, not naming it for what it is was strategic on behalf of policy officials. In 1981, when violence against women was mentioned in the Canadian House of Commons, laughter was allegedly heard throughout the Chamber (DeKeserdy & MacLeod, 1997). While members of the House of Commons laughed, women and girls were being killed, and violence against women continued in the private and public spheres of women's lives. Notably, there are many facets of abuse, and the control and degradation of being abused in any form by an intimate partner have powerful effects on a woman's self-esteem, which affects her ability to protect herself and her children (Dutton & Goodman, 2005).

While not all women abused by intimate partners experience Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), for many women experiencing trauma as a result of abuse, and decision-making abilities can be hindered. These effects of abuse can create significant impediments for women who seek emergency shelter. Humphreys, Lee, Neylan, and Marmar's (2002) shelter study concluded that the women living in a shelter had experienced an average of eight traumatic events over their lives, higher than the reported rates of non-abused women in the general population.

Most of the research conducted with women experiencing abuse explores the short- and long-term effects of abuse on women's physical and mental health. Intimate partner violence (IPV) is consistently associated with high rates of depression, anxiety disorders, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), sleep disorders, phobias, panic disorder, psychosomatic disorders, and suicidal behaviour and self-harm (WHO, 2005). Additionally, research indicates that female survivors of IPV are more likely to engage in substance use and/or abuse in an attempt to cope with depression and trauma-related symptoms (Testa & Leonard, 2001). Research further

suggests that mental health issues, including PTSD, depression, and substance abuse/dependence, may increase the chances that women will remain with their abusive partners and, in turn, increase the risk for re-abuse (Bell & Goodman, 2001). Moreover, the incidence of violent acts against women is estimated to be much higher than official police reported statistics to suggest, as a large percentage of this violence goes unreported (Statistics Canada, 2013). Many women survivors seek safety in shelters to escape from their partners safely, rather than calling the police (Tutty & Goard, 2002).

At one time, women's shelters offered programming and social group work. However, due to women's shelters shift away from social group work to individual-focused practice in addition to annual cuts of government funding (Tutty & Goard, 2002), group programs are not generally offered to women survivors of IPV living in emergency shelters in northeastern Ontario. Shelters aim to provide women with a safe environment. However, living in a shelter can be challenging. In Sudbury Ontario, up to 30 women and 15 children can reside at our local emergency shelter YWCA Genevra House. Sharing all amenities in this community setting doesn't allow for much privacy. Rules and regulations that are in places such as bag limits, curfew, and set meal times impede on a women's full independence. In addition to having experienced abuse, some women have mental health issues and substance abuse. Living in this setting for an average of three months can be difficult for some women, especially for women who are dealing with post-traumatic stress (Tutty & Goard, 2002).

Based on these growing concerns, my research explores if offering alternative methods to crisis intervention or cognitive behavioral therapy such as an arts-based mindfulness group work in the shelter setting helps women survivors cope more effectively with stress and trauma. In past studies, the Holistic Arts-Based Program (HAP) was successful in helping marginalized adults

develop group cohesion and a sense of belonging as well as improved coping skills, a better ability to focus, increased self-awareness, and improved mood (Coholic, Eys, McAlister, Sugeng & Smith, 2018).

The Holistic Arts-Based Program (HAP) aims to teach participants how to understand themselves and build their strengths (Coholic & Eys, 2016). Different than mainstream manualized mindfulness programs, the Holistic Arts-Based Program (HAP) (Coholic, Lougheed, & Cadell, 2009) is an emerging approach that integrates experiential mindfulness activities with arts-based methods. My study examines the HAP benefits of increasing mindfulness-based skills as resiliency against stress and trauma in a small group of women survivors at YWCA Genevra House. According to Talwar (2007), art can "address the non-verbal core of traumatic memory," making it fundamental in trauma treatment (p.22). I hoped that delivering arts-based mindfulness group work could help women survivors address difficult emotions in a safe space that fostered connection, healing, and empowerment. Furthermore, the flexibility, accessibility, and creativity of the HAP program seem to be an excellent fit for this vulnerable population. HAP will hopefully engage women in a creative process that is enjoyable and rewarding.

Research in mindfulness-based interventions has increased significantly over the past decades. However, the literature review demonstrates a limited number of emerging MBIs delivered explicitly to women survivors, especially living in emergency shelters. We understand that when people learn mindfulness skills such as self-awareness, self-acceptance, self-compassion, and self-regulation, they are empowered to reach their full potential. Women that reach their full potential are more likely to participate socially, economically, and politically, and this full participation directly benefits everyone.

Additionally, while emergency shelters for women are perceived as critical resources in most communities, they remained relatively understudied. YWCA has known for decades that shelters are the first and most effective defense against the harm of women abuse, but few studies have documented the experience of women who use their services (Tutty, 2006). American surveys of women residents have rated shelters and support groups amongst the most effective help resources (Tutty & Rothery, 2002), yet creative programs are cut annually.

As a shelter support worker at YWCA Genevra House, the lack of creative, supportive programming in our shelter amongst many other northeastern locations in Ontario is unfortunate because it impedes on our ability help empower women in our communities. Ultimately, this research study was my hope to create a space where survivors can connect and empower one other while learning concepts which would ultimately support their personal growth and development. I argue that it is possible to go beyond traditional one-on-one therapies such as crisis intervention counselling or cognitive-behavioral therapies often blame the victim and reinforce male dominance.

Additionally, instead of the hierarchy between worker and resident, I hoped to reduce the power dynamic between workers and women at the YWCA shelter by fostering trust, equity, and respect between those who live and those who work at the shelter. Rather than focusing on women's deficits, we should aim to create spaces where women's obvious capacities are recognized, given the enormous challenges and adversities they have faced and overcome.

This thesis is presented in four chapters. In the first chapter, I review the recent, pertinent literature on the topic and provide the research questions. Chapter Two offers a detailed description of the research methods, including study design, researcher reflexivity, and the data collection and analysis. Chapter Three consists of the findings from the data analysis, together

with a detailed discussion. Finally, in Chapter Four, the results are summarized, and I explore their implications for both emergency shelters for women escaping abuse from intimate partners as well as social work practices, providing recommendations for future research.

Chapter One
Literature Review

A literature search on mindfulness-based interventions with women survivors of intimate partner violence (IPV) was conducted using a combination of the following terms: mindfulness, interventions, women's shelters, women survivors of IPV, intimate partner violence (IPV), domestic violence, violence against women (VAW), healing, and empowerment. A search of the Google Scholar database revealed the following key themes: women's shelters/interventions women survivors and mental health (posttraumatic-stress disorder, depression, anxiety, and acute stress), women survivors and mindfulness (self-compassion, awareness, acceptance), healing and empowerment, arts-based, and group work. The themes identified support my research project examining the benefits and effectiveness of the Holistic Arts-Based Program (HAP) as a way to empower survivors of abuse. In this chapter, I will discuss the following concepts as they pertain to my project: VAW women's shelters, shelter-based services, mindfulness, the benefits of MBIs, mindfulness and women survivors, and the Holistic Arts-Based Program (HAP). This literature review will help provide a rationale for my research project.

History of VAW Shelters

Approximately every six days, a woman in Canada is killed by her intimate partner. Indigenous women are killed at six times the rate of non-Indigenous women (Statistic Canada, 2014). Intimate partner violence (IPV) committed by legally married, separated, divorced, opposite and same-sex common-law, dating partners (current and previous) and other intimate partners has been consistently identified as one of the most common forms of violence against women, both nationally and internationally (Sinha 2012; Johnson & Dawson, 2011). IPV can encompass a range of abusive behaviors from verbal and emotional abuse to sexual violence, physical assaults, and homicides. IPV accounts for one in every four violent crimes reported to

the police. In 2014, 8 in 10 victims of police-reported intimate partner violence were women. Overall, there were about 78,000 female victims of intimate partner violence, representing a rate of 542 victims per 100,000 women aged 15 years and older. On any given night in Canada, 3,491 women and their 2,724 children sleep in shelters because it isn't safe at home. On the other hand, about 300 women and children have turned away because shelters are already full (Statistic Canada, 2013).

Violence against women in public or private life began to capture the attention of social activists in early 1960. In efforts to address this issue, social activists brought legislative changes to protect women's rights and establish emergency shelters to provide refuge for women and their children. In 1965, the very first shelter for women was created by the Harbour Rescue Mission in Hamilton, Ontario, Canada. Forty-five years later, in 2011, 593 shelters were operating across Canada for women survivors of IPV (Burczycka & Cotter, 2011).

Shelters are essential because they provide safe accommodation and necessary personal supplies (including food and clothes) to women escaping abuse. After providing safety, workers assist women in transitioning to a life separate from an assaultive partner (Tutty & Rothery, 2002). Beyond safety, VAW shelters across Canada wanted to learn more about the needs of residents. In 2006, one national study asked 368 women as they entered and left emergency shelters across Canada: "What do you need from shelters?" Upon entry, women in this survey responded with these needs: a safe and secure place to stay (96%), followed by a "break" from the abusive partner (91%), a safe and secure place for their children to stay (88%), emotional support in the form of counselling from staff (76%), opportunity to connect with other women fleeing abusive relationships (53.5%), formal group discussions with other residents (51%), and fun group activities or outings (45%).

Additionally, women indicated that they wanted information about: coping with stress (71%), improving self-esteem and self-care (68.2%), coping (how to better help themselves) (65.4%), safety planning (how to protect themselves) (55.3%), patterns of abuse (learning how to recognize abuse) (44.7%), and learning how abuse affects their children (42.9%) (Tuttu, 2006, p. 55-56). Not surprisingly, women wanted more than a roof over their heads. Away from their abusive intimate partners, they wanted an opportunity to learn new skills and capacities to reach their full potential in all aspects of their lives. VAW shelter-based support services can play an essential role in empowering women to reach their full potential by offering immediate assistance, counselling, referral services, and intervention programs. However, the ability to provide services that can help meet the needs of women stated above are restricted by funding models, helping models, and resources available within shelters.

Shelter-Based Services

Funding has been a perennial problem for women shelters in Canada. Federal and provincial cuts to health and mental health services have led to a reported increase in residents with significant mental health and substance abuse problems. Other cuts to essential supports such as legal aid, child care, and community counseling have severely eroded the "safety net of programs" needed to facilitate women's freedom from violence (Tutty, 2006). The funding that most shelters receive from their provincial or territorial governments has never covered the total costs of providing shelter. Shelters are typically reimbursed for 65 to 80% of their costs, with the remainder of operating costs coming from local fund-raising (Tutty, 2006). General cuts to nation-wide funding significantly impact any shelter's ability to provide shelter-based services.

The different helping models that have emerged in shelters over time have also influenced the type of services available to women. Since the 1970s, three shelter models have

emerged in Canada. The first, classified as a feminist model, is often labeled as a liberationist or collective model. This model is characterized by strong, even radical feminist ideology, and non-hierarchical decision-making practices. The second is a non-feminist, professional protectionist or hierarchical model, and is grounded in mainstream social service or therapeutic ideologies, and traditional organizational practices. The third is a pro-feminist model, a model that combines feminist and non-feminist approaches (Mann, 2000).

The first shift towards the hierarchical model and traditional practices included a requirement from governments to adopt a non-profit organizational model of governance and a social services perspective. In this model, shelter staff, originally grassroots VAW advocates who were active participants in a social change movement were increasingly replaced by professionally-trained counselors. These changes created tension rooted in the notion that professionalization moves shelter practice away from advocacy and social change and into the realm of individual-focused services instead of group-focused services.

Today in shelters, dominant theoretical perspectives for direct practice are crisis intervention, cognitive behavioral therapy, and motivational interviewing (Johnson & Zlotnick, 2006). These have shown promising results that increase victim's safety and motivation for leaving abusing relationships, reducing PTSD symptoms, and fostering better relations between mothers and children (Johnson & Zlotnick, 2006; Muller et al. 2016; McDonald, Jouriles, & Skopp, 2006; Briere & Jordan, 2004).

Helping models in VAW shelters are based in feminist theory, working from an intersectional feminist framework that applies a critical lens to systems of power (patriarchy, colonialism, white supremacy, capitalism, etc.), and trauma theory. An intersectional feminist framework recognizes that feminism means different things to different people and that VAW

shelters adopt a feminist approach that meets the local and unique needs of the women accessing their services. A trauma-informed approach focuses on creating safety for survivors while also recognizing that trauma affects individuals on multiple levels, that institutions (including VAW shelters) can re-traumatize those who have histories of trauma, and that having an understanding of the impacts of trauma and access to quality services is crucial to the healing process (Elliott, Bjelajac, Fallot, Markoff, & Reed, 2005).

Despite the increased use of the trauma-informed approach in VAW shelters, those who provide support services to traumatized victims can themselves be affected by the professional encounter (Adams, Boscarino & Figley, 2006; Devilly, Wright, & Varker, 2009). In addition to potentially experiencing secondary trauma, service providers can experience high levels of fear for their safety, and caregiver burnout related to their sense of responsibility for the safety of survivors. Shelter service workers may also question their ability to meet their responsibilities affecting job satisfaction and self-efficacy (Iliffe & Steed, 2000).

Shelter staff has many responsibilities including enhancing survivor safety, managing distress, providing support, normalizing feelings, and helping survivors understand their victimization in a broader context, thereby dispelling the notion that victims are responsible for their abuse (Rizo, Macy, & Ermentrout, 2011). In fulfilling these goals, shelter support workers face multiple challenges posed by inadequate organizational resources, minimal training, and poor coordination with other community resources, all of which can undermine the provider's work environment, pose barriers to the provider's ability to provide high quality care, and lead the provider to experience symptoms of burnout (Kulkarni et al., 2012; Ullman & Townsend, 2007). The multiple challenges posed by inadequate time and resources call for more cost-

efficient, creative programming to ensure feasibility and suitability of shelter-based interventions.

The development of new innovative services and programs may also help improve the experiences of women's shelter stay. From my experience, the first night in our shelter is often the most difficult for women. Often, women need several days before making any decisions about their future. However, shelters are busy places, and residents often need to take immediate action to secure social assistance and housing. Once these processes are established, women may have medical appointments, and if the police are involved, she may have to make a statement about the events. If she is working or in school, she may need to continue attending to ensure her employment or enrollment. This being said, the experience of using a shelter may not always be a positive one. Given the communal living situation of women and children, all of whom have recently experienced an upsetting and often life-altering event, not everyone is responsive to the structure and demands. Besides, some women have issues beyond the abuse they've experienced, such as mental health problems and substance abuse (Tutty & Goard, 2002). Since the experiences of women in shelters can be challenging and isolating; helping women cultivate a path to healing and belonging in shelters is important to foster healing and empowerment.

Healing and Empowerment

The significant adverse effects related to intimate partner violence (IPV) have been well researched; however, there is an emerging body of research on women's healing from intimate partner violence, including some studies that demonstrate the possibility of growth in the aftermath of this form of violence. To properly discuss women's healing from IPV, the concept of healing must first be understood. According to Mount, Boston and Cohen (2007), healing can be defined by "the restoration to health, restoration of wholeness, well being, safety, prosperity,

and spiritual restoration" (p.372). This definition indicates that the term healing can be applied to all aspects of health such as emotional, mental, and spiritual well being, along with physical health. In Glaister's (2001) conceptual analysis of healing, the process of healing is cultivated through "a caring relationship by expanding consciousness and results in a sense of wholeness, integration, balance and transformation" (p. 65). Underpinning this definition is the concept of transformation (Glaister, 2001), which points towards growth following adversity.

The notion that an individual can experience positive transformation from suffering has been recognized for centuries in various religious, philosophical, and literary contexts (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2006; Linley & Joseph, 2004). The research suggests that between 30-70% of individuals who experienced trauma also report positive change and growth coming out of the traumatic experience (Linley, Joseph, & Goodfellow, 2008). This type of transformation is often referred to as posttraumatic growth. Posttraumatic growth is the experience of individuals whose development, at least in some areas, has surpassed what was present before the suffering occurred. Research has indicated three areas in which individuals feel positive changes.

The first area is the perception of self: people describe a change in their self-perception, accepting that they are more vulnerable than they realized while simultaneously discovering newfound strength, resilience, and wisdom. The second domain is relationships with others: people describe improved relationships, especially in the form of increased compassion for others and valuing existing bonds. The third domain is general life philosophy: people describe reevaluating their priorities and experiencing increased appreciation for life (Linley, Joseph, & Goodfellow, 2008).

Some researchers (Allen & Wozniak, 2010; Giles & Curreen, 2007; Smith, 2003) identified specific phases that comprise women's healing; others (Davis & Taylor, 2006; Farrell,

1996; Flasch et al., 2015; Taylor, 2004) viewed women's healing as an ongoing process rather than a series of phases, and focused on the themes across survivors' experiences. Whether women go through phases or processes, all of these findings reveal that women's transformative healing begins within themselves (introspective awareness and insight) and by building new helping relationships.

Helping relationships have been proven to mobilize change because one can understand that they are loved and accepted in healthy ways. These kinds of relationships can make it easier to "dismantle hope and put the abusive relationship in perspective" (Burke, Denison, Gielen, McDonnell, O'Campo, 2004, p.123). Hence the importance of implementing services and supports that will foster self-awareness, building new relationships, gaining new perspectives, and helping others.

Notably, many women survivors of IPV have grown up in abusive households or have only ever been in abusive relationships. As a result, these women don't always recognize that abusive behavior is destructive; rather, it is normalized. According to Sullivan, Juras, Bybee, Nguyen, and Allen (2000), creating a safe, non-judgmental space for women to express their thoughts, feelings, and fears can help them work through past abuse and learn to dismantle this normalcy. Although shelters are safe, non-judgmental communal spaces where women can feel safe to express their thoughts and feelings are rare since helping models have shifted away from social group work to more individual focused practices.

The structure and formality of social group work can successfully create safe non-judgmental spaces for women to learn from each other and dismantle the normalcy of abuse. Unfortunately, even communal spaces (e.g., kitchen, living room) that women share daily in shelters often don't provide them with a safe enough non-judgmental space to connect. Talking to

other women in the shelter about the abuse they've experienced is discouraged by staff. Upon entry, women are advised not to share stories of abuse to avoid triggering other women in the shelter. Instead, they are encouraged to keep to themselves and focus on their transitional plan.

Friendships between residents are not encouraged because some women are more vulnerable than others (e.g., mental health and addictions). As a result, power deferential between residents do exist, and some women can take advantage of others. Although shelters are places of safety, they are also communal living environments where a diverse group of people comes together at a time of crisis and transition. Consequently, not all women will like each other or get along. Surveys of shelter residents typically identify the pressures of communal living as the most stressful part of shelter living.

Shelters are also difficult places to parent and difficult places to be a kid. There are a lot of rules, with not much to do. Unfortunately, community living can also reproduce features of an abusive home. Under certain circumstances conflicts, personality clashes, cliques, gossiping, and bullying occur between residents. These circumstances usually arise from women judging other women, which in turn, is often the result of the negative judgment women have for themselves. As much as these ‘rules’ aim to protect women and reduce tensions within the shelter, they directly create a barrier for women to share and connect. Instead of discouraging women from making friends, shelters should offer women safe non-judgmental spaces for residents to foster connection as well as a sense of belonging.

This being said, starting the process of healing is often delayed by the number of times survivors return to their abusers. On average, a woman will leave an abusive relationship seven times before she leaves for good (YWCA, 2019). Interestingly, a study of 25 women survivors sampled by Khaw and Hardesty (2009) identified five stages of change in leaving an abusive

relationship. For women survivors, movements across the five stages of change may be both linear (i.e., from one stage to the next) and nonlinear (i.e., skipping stages). Stage one and two are defined as starting to care less for the abuser and disconnecting emotionally from the abusive relationship**.**

The third stage includes noticing the effects of the abuse and starting to make preparations to leave, and the fourth stage is returning to partner. This stage includes a lot of back and forth. Survivors need closure, but they also want to be physically and emotionally connected again, which leads to a return to the relationship**.** The fifth stage is leaving the abusive relationship for good (Khaw & Hardesty, 2009). It would be ideal for women to skip the fourth stage altogether. However, even if this stage cannot be skipped, Khaw and Hardesty (2009) reported that there are ways to reduce the number of times that survivors return by exploring the reasons why this occurs. First, in any relationship that ends, it takes time to grieve the loss of love and the relationship (Khaw & Hardesty, 2009). One way to move past this is for the survivor to understand that she is worth being treated well and counter self-judgments with positive affirmations. Self-worth is directly related to how you think you should be treated. Thus, understanding your worth is an essential component to building any healthy relationship that is built on trust and respect versus power, abuse and control.

Furthermore, Johnson, Worell, and Chandler (2005) define empowerment as "enabling women to access skills and resources to cope more effectively with current as well as future stress and trauma" (p. 109). Based on this definition, empowerment is further conceptualized as encompassing a set of attitudes and behaviors including positive self-evaluation and self-esteem, a favorable comfort/distress ratio, self-awareness, self-nurturance and self-care, effective

problem-solving skills, competent use of assertiveness skills, and access to economic, social, and community resources (Johnson, Worrell & Chandler, 2007).

YWCA Sudbury aims to empower women and their families to reach their full potential in body, mind, and spirit, through action, advocacy, community collaboration, and education. Values include a women's perspective (empowering women to take leadership roles), difference and diversity (embracing diversity among people), community-mindedness (building healthy communities free of violence), and the whole person (strength, wisdom, and character from the balanced development of the whole person in body, mind, and spirit) (YWCA, 2018).

To value the whole person, one must apply a holistic philosophy to better understand the complexity of an issue. In social work, a holistic approach involves examining all social factors of a person's life, rather than focusing on one issue. Social workers who practice this approach may examine the living environment, family, culture, and community. Analyzing an individual holistically comes from a variety of methods, including the ecological perspective or person in environment theory (Lynn & Mensinga, 2015). One holistic philosophy is mindfulness, which is a key component of the Holistic Arts-Based Program. Mindfulness is described next.

Mindfulness

Mindfulness is a holistic philosophy. The root of mindfulness is to relieve human suffering, to increase compassion, and to help individuals find the path to enlightenment (Armstrong, 2001). Mindfulness practice is about being in the present moment and bringing your attention to what is happening right now. According to Weiss (2004b), this present moment awareness can help people better understand themselves and others so that they can live a more joyful life. He describes the path of mindfulness as a way to “lead you to a place within yourself

where you may encounter the world without ideas or preconceptions, …where you can disengage from your habitual narrative and free yourself from mental constructs, …seeing the world as we are…allowing us to experience the delight of touching life deeply and authentically…giving us a way through suffering to joy" (p.54).

When it comes to complex issues such as abuse and suffering, people are often questioning 'why me.' Through aiding vulnerable women and children with such diverse needs, staff can benefit from taking a holistic approach to each. The holistic philosophy of mindfulness can help empower women because self-awareness is a part of healing. Learning more about one's thoughts, feelings, and emotions and how to sit with different feelings is an important part of being a resilient person. Essentially, mindfulness offers people a choice. Mindfulness can help you better understand your stress or pain and offer you a choice on how to express those difficult feelings.

Due to the growing interest of mindfulness over the past three decades, there has been a rich scholarly dialogue about how to define mindfulness as a construct. One shared definition of mindfulness is "a process of openly attending, with awareness, to one's present moment experience" (Creswell, 2017). This awareness of present moment experience is different from much of our daily life experience, in which we often find our minds wandering, engaging in self-criticism, ruminating about the past or worrying about the future, running on autopilot or suppressing unpleasant thoughts or emotions (Williams & Kabat-Zing, 2011). Moreover, the mindless state that runs most of our daily life experience has shown to predict subsequent unhappiness (Killingworth & Gilbert, 2018). In contrast, the practice of mindfulness has been associated with greater well-being in daily life (Brown & Ryan, 2003).

Mindfulness practice exists in various religions and traditions. The earliest traditions arose from Hinduism more than 4,000 years ago, where writings introduced the concept of "dharma" referred to as "the eternal law" or the "eternal way" beyond human origins (Jain, 2016, p.20). Buddhism was founded in the late 6th century by Siddhartha Gautama (the Buddha). Buddhism is a religion that aims to show its followers the "path to enlightenment" (Gunaratana & Gunaratana, 2011, p.140). To seek the path to enlightenment, meditation is an instrument to facilitate the development of self-discipline, detachment, and renunciation. (Gunaratana & Gunaratana, 2011).

Buddhist traditions have informed a great deal of research on mindfulness interventions; however, being mindfully aware is not equal to being Buddhist. Instead, it is part of being human. As Bhante Gunaratana (2011) states, "mindfulness is not limited by any conditions. It exists to some extent in every moment, in every circumstance that arises" (p.145). Similarly, Jon Kabat-Zinn (2003), one of the first practitioners to bring mindfulness to the Western world, states that "we are all mindful to one degree or another, moment to moment" (p.145-146). Thus, as human beings, we can develop present moment awareness, and this capacity can be further developed through mindfulness-based interventions.

Benefits of MBIs

Recent studies have shown that through mindfulness meditation, the mind can create new gray matter in the hippocampus, known to be essential for learning and memory, and in structures associated with self-awareness, compassion, and introspection (Hölzel et al., 2011). By actively paying attention in the present moment, people start to train more adaptive reactivity in the brain. This training helps with stress, anxiety, depression, trauma, and even addiction

(Hölzel, et al., 2011). Consequently, mindfulness makes you less likely to respond to negative self-judgment because you can stop and be aware of the emotional state.

The power of mindfulness is the ability to recognize your thoughts, and realizing that you are not your thoughts, by choosing not to identify with what your thoughts are saying. Ultimately, the goal is to change the neurobiology by actively paying attention in the present moment; by doing so, people can start to train the more adaptive reactivity in the brain. This training helps with stress, anxiety, depression, trauma, and addiction (Hölzel et al., 2011).

The mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR) program, developed by Jon Kabat-Zinn at the University of Massachusetts Medical School, is a well-known mindfulness intervention in the scientific literature. The MBSR program engages participants in an eight-week manualized program of two hours' group-based classes with a trained practitioner, a daily guided meditation practice (approximately 45 min/day), and a day-long mindfulness retreat (occurring during week six of the eight-week program) (Ludwig & Kabat-Zinn, 2008). Much of the MBSR program focuses on learning how to mindfully attend to body and breath sensations through the use of body scans, breathe awareness meditations, gentle stretching, and yoga, along with discussions and practices geared toward applying mindful awareness to daily life experiences, including dealing with stress.

Kabat-Zinn studied mindfulness under several Buddhist teachers, including Thich Nhat Hanh. This experience gave him an Eastern foundation in mindfulness that he integrated with Western science to develop MBSR. Zen Master, Thich Nhat Hanh, is a global spiritual leader, poet and peace activist, revered throughout the world for his powerful teachings and bestselling writings on mindfulness and peace. Kabat-Zinn (2013) defines mindfulness as "a means of paying attention in a particular way; on purpose, in the present moment, and nonjudgmentally"

(p.19). According to him, everyone is going to encounter uncertainty, stress, pain, loss, grief, and sadness, but humans also have the enormous potential to embrace these experiences with love, joy, and connection (Kabat-Zinn, 2013).

This integration with Western science was a crucial aspect in helping mindfulness gain widespread popularity in the West. MBSR served as inspiration for other mindfulness-based therapy programs such as Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT), aimed at treating Major Depressive Disorder (Teasdale et al., 2000), and the Mindfulness-Based Relapse Prevention (MBRP) aimed at treating drug addiction (Bowen et al., 2014). The earliest work on MBIs was focused on treating chronic pain for patients who were not responding well to traditional medical treatments (Kabat-Zinn, 2003). Thus, much of the interest in this physical health domain has reported that mindfulness interventions can foster greater body awareness (introspective), promote relaxation, improve stress management and foster stress resilience, and the development of coping skills (Creswell & Lindsay, 2014). Furthermore, studies also show that MBIs are effective methods to reduce pain symptoms and dependence on pain medication, including alleviating negative impacts of stress-related disruptions in health behaviors such as sleep, exercise, smoking, and diet (Kabat-Zinn, 2003; Ludwig and Kabat-Zinn, 2008).

Additionally, MBIs help individuals notice and regulate maladaptive thoughts, emotional responses, and automatic behaviors underlying mental health problems (Hayes & Feldman, 2004). More specifically, MBIs have shown strong evidence in reducing depression amongst at-risk populations. The benefits of MBIs seem to be well-received by those at higher risk of relapse or individuals who suffered from maltreatment in childhood (Teasdale et al., 2004).

Mindfulness is the open and accepting awareness of one's thoughts and feelings, including a curious and compassionate attitude towards the thought patterns and bodily

sensations that occur when one is feeling depressed or anxious. The process of mindful awareness helps reduce avoidance, self-judgment, and rumination that are often triggered by depression and anxiety (Strauss et al., 2014). Several well-controlled studies suggest that mindfulness-based interventions reduce craving, drug use, and drug relapse rates in at-risk individuals. Mindfully attending to drug cues reduces neural and self-reported craving amongst smokers (Westbrook et al. 2011), and some initial evidence suggests that MBIs can reduce cravings more than traditional treatments such as Cognitive Behavioral Therapy treatment (Garland et al. 2016).

MBIs show improvements of sustained attention (Jha et al. 2015, Mrazek et al. 2012), working memory performance (Mrazek et al. 2013, Zeidan et al. 2010), and problem-solving performance (Mrazek et al. 2013, Ostafin & Kassman 2012). Generally, MBSR and other 8-12-week mindfulness-based interventions are supported by the scientific community as evidence-based forms of delivering mindfulness training. However, as the literature of mindfulness has grown, some skepticism has developed over who should be delivering MBIs and how they should be offered. More research is recommended to shift the focus of translating knowledge of MBIs into reliable, effective, and sustainable ways of delivering mindfulness training in community settings (Dimidjian & Segal 2015).

Mindfulness and Women Survivors of IPV

There is a limited amount of research exploring the impact of delivering MBIs to women survivors of IPV. Of these studies, very few explore the delivery of these interventions specifically with women survivors of IPV, during or after their stay in emergency shelters. Although MBIs for women survivors of IPV living in emergency shelters is understudied, emerging research suggest that MBIs may hold promise for survivors of IPV (Dutton, Bermudez,

Matas, Majid, & Myers, 2013; Kimbrough, Magyari, Langenberg, Chesney, & Berman, 2010). Paying attention, on purpose, in the present moment, non-judgmentally (Kabat-Zinn, 2013), is thought to help reduce psychopathology in post-traumatic symptoms (Follette, Palm, & Pearson, 2006), and counter experiential avoidance (Thompson and Waltz, 2010). In other words, mindfulness can go beyond traditional cognitive-behavioural philosophy, by aiming to change the relationship with thoughts, rather than changing the thought context itself.

For trauma symptoms, MBIs may enhance the treatment provided to women survivors of IPV (Follette, Palm, & Pearson, 2006) by increasing awareness (Teasdale et al., 2002), leading to the understanding that thoughts, emotions, and sensations linked to past traumas are inherently short-lived and not necessarily truthful reflections of present reality (Teasdale, Segal & Williams, 2004). From a mindfulness perspective, trauma symptoms can be described as a form of suffering by an inability to be aware in the present moment. Most of the symptoms of trauma are displayed through a variety of avoidant behaviours. Some examples include efforts to suppress unpleasant thoughts, removal of oneself from situations that provoke negative experiences, substance use, and emotional numbing (Follette, Palm, & Pearson, 2006).

Understandably, women survivors avoid situations, thoughts, and emotions associated with trauma to avoid being re-traumatized. However, there is considerable evidence illustrating the “paradoxical effects of avoidance," which can increase the occurrence of unpleasant thoughts and intensify the negative emotional experience (Follette, Palm, & Pearson, 2006, p.50). When engaging in avoidance behaviours (i.e., distraction, worry, etc.), one is not aware of the present moment. Mindfulness can improve the effectiveness of exploring treatments through increasing patients' ability to “contact painful memories, thoughts, and feelings without engaging in avoidance strategies” (Follette, Palm, & Pearson, 2006, p.52).

Onken, Carroll, Shoham, Cuthbert, and Riddle (2014) conducted an exploratory study of a trauma-informed MBSR intervention (TI-MBSR) in a community setting for female survivors of IPV. The TI-MBSR intervention tested was tailored by pairing mindfulness practices with trauma-specific psychoeducation to facilitate awareness of trauma responses, without avoidance or reactivity to those experiences. Mindful breathing and body scanning techniques were taught as a way to titrate autonomic nervous system activation, enabling participants to attain an optimal level of arousal for processing traumatic memories and emotions without suppression, dissociation, or flooding. By combining mindfulness and psychoeducation, IPV survivors are taught to develop self-compassion (Neff, 2003) and insight into their maladaptive coping behaviors, which demonstrated reduction of feelings of shame while allowing for the possibility of adaptive behavioral change (Onken, Carroll, Shoham, Cuthbert, & Riddle, 2014)

In another study, the effects of MBSR on low-income women with a history of intimate partner violence (IPV) was examined as a community-based intervention for posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD). This qualitative study explored the feasibility, acceptability, and preliminary effectiveness of MBSR for reducing symptoms of PTSD and depression. MBSR was delivered to five groups involving 53 participants, in 10 weekly, 1.5-hour sessions and a 5-hour retreat. The program was offered within the shelters where participants lived and at a community hospital for those not living in the shelters. Results indicate that participants felt MBSR promoted healing from trauma and reduced negative responses to daily stress. Positive benefits include increased self-awareness, self-acceptance, self-empowerment, self-compassion, sense of belonging, nonreactivity, and self-care, as well as decreased distress (Dutton, Bermudez, Matas, Majid, & Myers, 2013).

IPV survivors often experience feelings of self-blame following an experience of IPV. Tesh, Learman, & Pulliam (2015) cite many sources that correlate self-blame with IPV survivors. Self-blame may serve a functional purpose as a way to subdue conflict when survivors feel a potentially deadly or harming threat. While self-blame may calm the abuser and create temporary safety for the survivor, the residual effects are often internalized. Feelings of self-blame and self-loathing are associated with negative outcomes and impede healing. In particular, research has shown that feelings of self-blame amongst survivors is associated with depression, anxiety and PTSD (Dutton, Bermudez, Matas, Majid, & Myers, 2013).

Additionally, reducing survivor self-blame potentially impacts survivors' safety. Safety planning is a primary crisis counseling procedure that shelter staff provides for IPV survivors. In a study by Zabelina and Robinson (2010), people who were low in self-compassion and high in self-judgment (similar to self-blame) were also low in creativity. Creativity can be a critical skill for problem-solving, including safety planning, during times of crisis. MBIs may assist in helping survivors reduce feelings of self-blame, increasing creativity, and consequently increasing the survivor's ability to strategize safety and survival plans creatively.

Based on this research, Tesh, Learman, and Pulliam (2013) explored the benefits of using mindful self-compassion strategies for survivors of IPV. The study participants were provided 12-two hour sessions of compassionate mind training at a mental health clinic. At the end of the study, participants experienced significantly reduced levels of depression, anxiety, self-criticism, shame, and feelings of inferiority, as well as increased levels of self-soothing and self-reassurance.

More recently, Crowder (2016) explored MBI with survivors of IPV, which in turn positively influenced their ability to reconstruct a sense of self and agency. Many women

escaping abusive relationships exhibit high levels of negative self-judgment (Walker & Bright, 2009). Negative self-judgment is often the result of feelings of unworthiness, inferiority, failure, and guilt (Warren, Smeets, & Neff, 2016). Subsequently, learning mindfulness concepts such as self-compassion and non-judgment can be especially beneficial. Warren, Smeets, and Neff (2016) suggested that self-compassion involves "treating oneself with care and concern when confronted with personal mistakes, failures, and painful life situations" (p.4). Instead of attacking and berating oneself for personal shortcomings, the self is offered warmth and unconditional acceptance.

Being mindful is being aware of one's pain in a balanced way that neither ignores and avoids nor exaggerates painful thoughts and emotions. Mindful awareness of emotional pain can facilitate acceptance and lead to a warmer, kinder response and therefore, lessen self-blame (Kabat-Zinn, 2013). Subsequently, learning self-compassion and non-judgment through mindfulness practice can give women the ability to cope with negative emotions. By "embracing one's suffering with compassion the negative state is ameliorated when positive feelings of kindness, connectedness, and mindful presence are generated" (Warren, Smeets, & Neff, 2016, p. 7).

This summary of current research of the delivery of MBIs with survivors of IPV suggests promising benefits with no adverse effects. Naturally, it seems reasonable to deliver MBIs to women who experience pain and suffering from abuse as self-compassion is integral to mindfulness practice. MBIs may have the potential to offer women an opportunity to cultivate an intentional, embodied, present-moment, non-judgmental awareness within a psychoeducation framework. In other words, mindfulness is liberating; it opens space for choosing new

opportunities, instead of reacting from wounds of oppression, survivors can work with afflicting thoughts and emotions towards healing and empowerment.

Nevertheless, despite knowing that mindfulness enhances creativity, problem-solving and decision making (Zabelina & Robinson, 2010), skills that are important for women during times of crisis, the infusion of creativity through creative arts in the delivery of MBIs are limited. Hansen (2005) described the potential for bringing art-based ways of knowing into teaching and learning spaces as ways to listen and learn from one another with care and compassion yet MBIs do not offer a creative outlet to learn or express oneself. Finally, findings from MBIs with women survivors of IPV suggest more research is required to determine what constitutes a cost-effective MBI for women residing in VAW shelters.

Holistic Arts-Based Program (HAP)

The Holistic Arts-Based Program (HAP) teaches mindfulness skills and concepts using arts-based methods, in a safe group environment where participants engage in activities that help them better understand their thoughts, feelings, and behaviors, and recognize their strengths (Coholic, 2011). For a conceptual map of HAP (See Appendix A). Program goals consist of (1) teaching mindfulness concepts, (2) cultivating self-awareness and self-expression, (3) fostering self-compassion and empathy, and (4) identifying and encouraging personal strengths (Coholic, 2016). HAP utilizes a strength-based approach, empowering participants to recognize and develop their strengths (Coholic, 2016).

Coholic, Eys, McAlister, Sugeng, and Smith (2018) investigated the benefits of an arts-based mindfulness group intervention with adults experiencing anxiety and depression. A 12-week arts-based mindfulness group was conducted and compared to a 12-week cognitive-behavioral group program. Both groups self-reported lower anxiety and depression scores.

However, the arts-based group participants stressed mutual aid and enjoyment of the intervention, while the other group participants were focused on individual learning with more attrition from that group program.

The enjoyment of the intervention is another component of HAP. Children, youth, and adults that have participated have mentioned how the program was fun and enjoyable (Coholic, 2011; Coholic & Eys, 2016; Coholic et al., 2018). Change can happen for individuals through joy and positivity. As mentioned above, the direct practices in shelters are based on correctional models focused on risks, needs, and weaknesses. In contrast, HAP creates a fun, positive, creative space where people can learn, recognize, and develop their strengths.

Arts-based activities used in HAP include drawing, painting, creative writing, collages, working with sand, modeling clay, Tai Chi movements, and guided visualizations (Coholic, Oystrick, Posteraro, & Lougheed, 2016). The use of arts-based methods helps participants engage themselves in the process of learning new themes and ideas being explored in the group. Throughout recorded history, people have used pictures, stories, dances, and chants as healing rituals (Graham-Pole, 2000). These methods are still relevant and beneficial as humans are born with an innate desire to express themselves.

Additionally, many art therapists suggest that creative arts can improve psychological and physical well-being. More specifically, it can “relieve stress, encourage creative thinking, boost self-esteem, provide a sense of accomplishment, increase brain plasticity, and increase empathy and tolerance” for others (Leckey, 2011, p.508). Art therapies are increasingly effective as therapeutic and transformational tools because they are accessible ways to express yourself without language. Art provides people with a focus allowing people to experience the present moment, giving your mind a break from racing thoughts. When someone gets fully immersed in

a creative endeavor, they might find themselves in "the zone" or in a state of "flow" (Stuckey & Nobel, 2010, p.260). For example, when creating art, one must concentrate on the details and pay more attention to the environment. In this way, it can act as mindful meditation. By drawing, painting, or sculpting, one can make conscious or unconscious thoughts, feelings, or emotions visible and tangible through paper or clay.

Notably, arts-based experiential methods are different than traditional art therapy. Art therapy typically requires an art therapist to deliver the therapy where the work is analyzed, interpreted, or admired. Arts-based methods are used to facilitate self-expression through non-verbal communication. In HAP, after the art creations are completed, the process and outcomes are explored collaboratively with participants to gain insights, understanding, and deeper meaning (Lougheed, 2016). Arts-based methods are also relevant and engaging, especially for marginalized populations, because art helps people express experiences that are too difficult to put into words.

The group work component of this program promotes normalization, connection, and belonging, offering participants a supportive non-judgmental environment amongst their peers (Coholic, 2016). Being in a group with others also has many social and emotional benefits. These benefits meet the fundamental social and emotional needs of human beings of connection and belonging. Social group work creates a space for this to occur. For one, being in a group reduces isolation because other people in the group are going through similar challenges. Understanding each other's similarities bring group members closer together as they develop "a mutual sense of identification that fosters a sense of belonging" (Drumm, 2006, p.23).

Throughout the group process, participants learn to support others, share time responsibly, and explore differences and commonalities. Group members also learn problem-

solving skills through the successful resolution of conflict shared by others, which empowers them to deal with similar challenges (Northen & Kurland, 2001). The mutual aid system of group work is a "vehicle in which to satisfy social needs for affection, belonging, acceptance, self-esteem, and actualization" (Drumm, 2006, p.25). The power of social group work stems from reflection and interactions that occur between group members. The dynamic interchanges between each member highlight commonalities and differences and seeing one's self in a relationship are vital for building self-awareness and self-esteem (Drumm, 2006).

Recognizing and developing strengths throughout the program is another objective of HAP. The strength-based approach emphasizes self-determination and strengths, a way of viewing clients as resourceful and resilient in the face of adversity (Healy, 2005). This approach is an excellent response to other deficit-focused approaches. For example, in women shelters, crisis intervention or cognitive behavioral therapy are widely used following a correction model focused on risks, needs, and addressing weaknesses. Alternatively, the strength-based approach can enhance strengths and builds on positive characteristics that women already have.

I hypothesize that HAP at YWCA Genevra House can provide an opportunity for each woman to receive the support necessary to reduce negative psychological issues preventing her from moving into a life free of violence. According to Khaw and Hardesty (2009), women survivors can successfully move through the stages of change when they rediscover self-worth, self-care, counter negative self-judgment, and receive support in a non-judgmental environment that offer resources and education.

Study Rationale

YWCA has known for decades that shelters are the first and most effective defense against the harm of women abuse, but few studies have documented the experience of women

who use their services (Tutty, 2006). Surveys of women survivors have rated shelters and support groups amongst the most effective help resources (Tutty, 2006), yet creative programs are cut annually. Importantly, creativity in shelter-based studies can cultivate innovative ways of helping and empowering women within restrictive budgets. Consequently, it would be beneficial to explore emerging approaches such as arts-based methods to help determine what might best contribute to support, heal, and empower women during critical turning points in their lives.

Moreover, current research is limited in terms of northeastern Ontario context where there are inequities in social support services and health outcomes compared to the rest of the province. For example, women and children in northeastern Ontario, especially Aboriginal women and children, are increasingly experiencing abuse and or/sexual assault (Statistic Canada, 2013). According to Statistics Canada's 2014 General Social Survey (GSS), Aboriginal women 15 years and older are four times more likely to experience violence than non-Aboriginal women. Aboriginal communities, organizations and agencies recognize that the root causes of violence against Aboriginal women lie “in the interconnections between race, culture, class and gender, which have routinely marginalized so many Aboriginal women beyond any reasonable expectation of security of life and person” (Hunter, 2005, p.17)

In particular, rural northern regions present unique barriers to the delivery of effective quality services and programs, and the expectation that the communities will contribute a portion of operating costs creates more difficulties for these regions that have a smaller population base (Tutty, 2006). For instance, less people equals less financial support; low population bases receive less from donors and government partners. Geographical isolation can also have a detrimental effect on the recognition and meeting of all women’s needs as we are an underserviced area.

Unequal distribution of health care services leaves residents in the northern parts of Canada including Northern Ontario, with increased mental health challenges related to geographic location, historical and intergenerational trauma, and economic issues. Further barriers are created by the lack of culturally appropriate care, the cost of accessing services, and geographic distance (Hartford, Schrecker, Wiktorowicz, Hoch, & Sharp, 2003; Kirmayer, Brass, & Tait, 2000). Particular challenges can also occur when working with the survivors of sexual assault in northern Ontario. Coholic and Blackford's (2003) study demonstrated that there are issues associated with the work of sexual assault counselling and support that are unique to the northern Ontario context, which in turn can compound the effects of secondary trauma. These include the lack of community awareness and support for sexual assault work, less anonymity, privacy and confidentiality issues, the isolated nature of communities, and the unique cultural characteristics of northern Ontario communities.

With this in mind, culturally sensitive services and supports based in trauma-informed approach and community-based approach to service delivery in northern and rural communities are important to implement in order to provide appropriate care in this region. Al-Harmad and O'Gorman's (2016) recommendations in the Northern Policy Institute (NPI) report include implementing collaborative approaches so we can improve our understanding of best practices in mental health care by building partnerships with existing community programs, promoting research, and program evaluations.

Best practices should also aim to empower women survivors in these areas. These types of practices include holistic social work such as arts-based methods and group work. For one, creative and experimental arts have been found to be useful in helping trauma survivors while group work has been proven to reduce isolation, help build relationships, and foster a sense of

belonging (D'Amore, Martin, Wood, & Brooks, 2018; Drumm, 2006). Arts-based group work may also provide an opportunity for women participants to explore their spirituality (Recollet, Coholic, and Cote-Meek, 2009).

Coholic (2015) discussed that group participants in the holistic arts-based mindfulness program (HAP), used their spiritual beliefs as ways of helping them make sense of their life circumstances and/or connecting to a higher power. For example, the exploration of dreams has been identified as spiritually-sensitive practice. In Coholic and LeBreton's (2007) study, group participants connected dreams with spirituality with the belief that dreams contained divine messages or premonitions, or they were a way to connect with someone who had passed away. All in all, the social and cultural relevance of holistic social work practices with survivors of abuse living in this region further supports the significance of this exploration into the benefits of an arts-based mindfulness group program for women seeking shelter from abuse in Northeastern Ontario.

Findings from the literature review suggest that programs like Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) and Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT) or adaptations based on the MBSR format have also had successful outcomes for women who have experienced trauma as a result of IPV. Findings from these studies demonstrated reduced stress, increased self-compassion, self-awareness, acceptance, healing, wellbeing, self-regulation, and presence (Dutton, Bermudez, Matas, Majid, & Myers, 2013).

Additionally, women survivors often have similar issues with positive self-concept and self-esteem, self-awareness, emotional regulation, and interpersonal problem-solving skills (Dutton et al., 2006). In light of this, HAP can be beneficial because it aims to build these various aspects of resilience (Coholic, 2011). Even when dealing with trauma, the integration of

mindfulness skills could help by increasing participants' ability to exchange painful memories, thoughts, and feelings without engaging in avoidance behaviors (Follette, Palm, & Pearson, 2006). Instead of avoidance, learning mindfulness can encourage acceptance and non-judgment exploration of thoughts or feelings.

I hope the Holistic Arts-Based Program can create a safe, non-judgmental space where shelter residents can express themselves and identify and develop their strengths. By learning, practicing, and embodying mindfulness concepts such as acceptance, self-compassion, and non-judgment, individuals can foster their healing and transformation. Strength-based interventions such as HAP are essential programs for women survivors of IPV because they aim to empower participants. Finally, HAP is unique in offering mindfulness, creativity, and group work all in one program, which may help meet a variety of needs within VAW shelters. Especially if funding in VAW shelters continues to be a barrier, offering HAP, a cost-efficient program can be suitable and feasible in this setting. This exploration will also meet the need for increased qualitative study in this area so that we can better understand the complexities of women who have survived abuse.

Research Questions

Dr. Diana Coholic and colleagues originally developed HAP to help build self-regulation and resiliency skills in vulnerable children and youth in care. I believe that through this experiential learning, women living at YWCA Genevra House would actively engage in fun, interactive activities increasing their knowledge of mindfulness concepts and skills, and helping them cope more effectively. The strength-based group work component of this program aims to offer women a safe, non-judgmental space to foster healing and empowerment during a critical turning point in their lives.

The purpose of this research study is to answer the questions:

1) Does participating in a 12-week mindfulness arts-based group program improve women survivors of IPV skills in mindfulness, and change their perceptions of the stress they are experiencing?
2) What are the experiences of women survivors of IPV in HAP?

Conclusion

In summary, this literature review clarifies the concepts of mindfulness and women's empowerment, explores current research into MBIs with an emphasis on the impact with women survivors of IPV, more specifically women who are currently living in transitional houses and shelters for IPV. Additionally, the Holistic Arts-Based Program (HAP) is described to establish support for the study. The next chapter will provide a synopsis of my personal and professional background as it relates to and impacts this study, with details of the methodological approach, setting, target population, recruitment methods, participants, data analysis techniques, ethical considerations, validation methods, and emergent themes developed in my thesis.

Chapter Two
Research Methodology

The following chapter describes the study's theoretical framework, research strategy, and data analysis techniques. The study setting, target population, recruitment process, participants, and ethical considerations are revealed, and validation methods are illustrated to support findings. Researcher reflexivity is shared to offer transparency concerning my background, potential bias, and influences. Thematic analysis of pre- and post-semi-structured group interviews led to the development of three main themes. The themes are (1) benefits of learning mindfulness concepts and skills, (2) benefits of art-based experimental methods, and (3) benefits of strength-based group work.

Study Design

The theoretical framework of this study is social constructivism. Social constructivism is a social learning theory based on the ideas of Vygotsky (1978), who argued that human development is socially situated, and knowledge is socially and culturally constructed. Creswell (2009) emphasizes that social constructivism serves as a useful theoretical framework as it allows for qualitative analysis to reveal insights on how people gain knowledge through social interactions. Social constructivism is a theory that knowledge and many aspects of the world around us are not real in and of themselves; they exist because we give them a reality through social and cultural understanding. Moreover, this theory states that people's ideas coincide with their experiences and that writers build on their socio-cultural awareness, a critical point in identity construction. Social constructivism was relevant for my research study; through this framework, I was better able to understand the experiences of women in HAP. Moreover, I gained insights into the ways the women gained knowledge through their interactions with other

women in the group. Social constructivism also helped me reflect on my own biases and interpretations of the women's experiences in HAP.

Qualitative research is a type of scientific research. As Mack (2005) stated, qualitative methods seek to understand a given research problem from the perspectives of the local population it involves. As a result, it is especially useful in exploring the specific values, opinions, behaviours, and sociocultural contexts of particular populations. Much of the strength of these methods is its ability to provide rich descriptions of how people experience an issue. These descriptions provide information about the "human side" of a question that is often contradictory behaviours, beliefs, opinions, emotions, and relationships of individuals (Mack, 2005, p. 3).

The three most common data collection methods in qualitative methods are participant observation, in-depth interviews, and focus groups. Data is then generated by field notes, audio recordings, and transcripts (Mack, 2005). These methods align with a social constructivism framework because they seek to explore phenomena yet are flexible in design. For example, researchers who use qualitative methods usually ask open-ended questions in semi-structured interviews. With qualitative methods, the relationship between the researcher and the participant is often less formal than in quantitative research (Mack, 2005). Thus, participants have the opportunity to respond more elaborately and in greater detail. Responses can be meaningful, unanticipated by the researcher, and rich and explanatory.

Another advantage of qualitative methods is that they allow the researcher the flexibility to probe initial participant responses – that is, to ask why or how. When used along with quantitative methods, qualitative research can help us to interpret and better understand the complex reality of a given situation and the implications of quantitative data. This combination is

called mixed methods research, which is a type of methodology for conducting research that involves collecting, analyzing, and integrating quantitative (e.g., surveys, scales) and qualitative (e.g., focus groups, interviews) methods. Mixed methods are used to purposefully obtain a "fuller picture and deeper understanding of a phenomenon" (Johnson, Onwuegbuzie, & Turner, 2007, p.119). Combining both qualitative and quantitative research methods is a way to investigate the social world as best as one can; a world that typically involves more than one methodological tradition and thus more than one way of knowing. This approach allowed me to use more than one technique for gathering, analyzing, and representing the experiences of women in the program, to gain a better understanding of the study results.

Setting

Facilitation of HAP was in a large private boardroom of YWCA Genevra House, Sudbury, Ontario. YWCA Genevra House is a Turning Point Program, an emergency shelter for women and children escaping abuse from their intimate partners (including same-sex partners), as well as women 50 years and over who are fleeing violence from their live-in caregiver (YWCA, 2018). YWCA Genevra House provides a safe environment for women and their children and offers several services and supports designed to empower women to reach their full potential in body, mind, and spirit through action, advocacy, community collaboration, and education (YWCA, 2018).

YWCA Genevra House houses on average 20-30 women and 10-15 children and is equipped to provide support services, making it a well-suited setting to support this type of research. Storage in the boardroom held all the equipment and supplies required for the study. This shelter is securely monitored 24/7 to ensure the safety of all residents. Offering HAP onsite was necessary to allow the women to remain in the shelter while safely accessing the program.

Recruitment

Convenience sampling was employed for participants' selection as the research study was proposed to women residing at Genevra House in August 2018. The Executive Director of YWCA Genevra House, Ms. Marlene Gorman, and the Active Manager Ms. Deborah Dumontelle were agreeable and supportive in allowing me to recruit residents to participate in the research project. Both transitional workers at Genevra House helped me reach women who had recently transitioned out of the shelter by providing them with a poster about the program in person or via email. There were no exclusionary criteria to disqualify prospective subjects from inclusion in the study within the established target population.

First, Dr. Coholic attended the shelter to introduce the program. She explained the program's aims, structure, and described the benefits of learning mindfulness through arts-based methods at Genevra House to interested women. She also answered questions that arose about the program. Dr. Coholic explained that HAP had not been previously studied with women leaving abusive relationships and that we are interested in learning if HAP will be beneficial for the participants.

We believed that by having Dr. Coholic present information about the program would lessen any perception of coercion to participate. If I, as the researcher or someone else employed by YWCA Genevra House presented the program/project, some women may have felt that they should attend even if they did not want to. If a woman made the commitment to the 12-week program, but her plan to transition out of the shelter was set before the program end date, she was welcomed to come back to the shelter during program hours to fulfill her commitment to the group program.

After this presentation, women were invited to record their name and email address to our active manager Ms. Deborah Dumontelle. The prospective candidates were given a detailed hand

out with information about the arts-based mindfulness group program (See Appendix B) and advised that they would be notified when more specific details regarding the precise dates and times of program delivery were determined. Posters with information about the program were then displayed at Genevra House (See Appendix C).

Recruitment was meant to continue until I had reached a minimum of 6 or a maximum of 10 women. The smaller the group, the higher the likelihood of close relationships and full, meaningful participation in the group and the program. With a smaller group size, there is also more opportunities and time for participants to "communicate," "participate," and "speak up" (Toseland & Rivas, 2006, p.74). A smaller group also allowed women to build closer relationships and allowed more time for feedback or discussions. Our idea was that if more than 10 women expressed an interest in participating in the HAP, a second sign-up sheet would have been posted for a second group to begin.

Initially, a total of eight women residing at the shelter expressed an interest in participating in HAP. To accommodate mothers in the group, it was suggested by some of the women that we start at 9 am, shortly after their children left for school. Three weeks into the 12-week program, more women in the shelter started asking if they could join the program. In October 2018, a second sign-up sheet was posted for a second group to begin. Again, recruitment continued until I had attracted x women for HAP. All women in this second group requested the program be offered in the evening.

To summarize, recruitment efforts led to the formation of two different HAP groups, one with eight participants who began the program during the week of September 23rd, 2018, and a second group with six participants starting the week of October 22nd, 2018. The groups were co-facilitated with support from three female social work students training in HAP. One was an

MSW student experienced in facilitating HAP, and the other two were 4th year and 3rd year BSW students. All three of these students were assigned to each group by my first thesis supervisor.

Participants

What follows is an explanation of the women's pseudonyms, a description of the participants and groups, and reasons for participation. Pseudonyms were selected using the baby name generator Magic Baby Names. Each participant's pseudonym was chosen from a list of similarly popular, gender-specific names generated by the website. Pseudonyms were selected using the first initial of her first name and matched with a name that held similar ranking in popularity based in the participant's year of birth. The women are identified as Lilian, Janet, Marilyn, Donna, Susan, Tracy, Vanessa, Kimberly, Jane, Jessica, Rebecca, Julie, Michelle, and Heaven. Initially, 14 women began the HAP and ranged in age from 24-77 years old with a median age of 46 years. In group one, eight women started the program at the ages of 24, 33, 36, 50, 59, 67, 74, and 77 years old; with a mean age of 52 years. In group two, six women began the program at the ages of 27, 28, 34, 38, 47, and 53; with a mean age of 38 years. Due to attrition, complete data was collected from 10 of the original 14 participants.

Group one was held from 9-11am on Thursdays and consisted of eight women including Janet, Lilian, Marilyn, Donna, Susan, Vanessa, Tracy, and Kimberly. All participants attended the pre-group interviews. Of the initial eight who began the program, Lilian only participated in the first three sessions. Lilian approached me, asking to withdraw from the program because she explained that she was uncomfortable with women in the group, sharing painful feelings. She did express appreciating the opportunity to join a creative program in the shelter but felt most of the discussions about difficult emotions to be ~~t~~oo challenging.

Before the first session, all eight women in group one were living together at the shelter. The average stay at the shelter is three months. Despite living in such proximity for this duration of time, participants did not know each other's first names, only one another's faces. Coming together in this way was new, and most women were shy and reserved at first. However, after the first few activities, women started to open up, connect, and relate to each other. It was not long before the women became a cohesive unit. The lowest number of sessions attended by a group member from group one was 10 sessions.

Group two was held from 6-8pm on Mondays and consisted of six women including Jane, Jessica, Rebecca, Julie, Michelle, and Haven. Of the initial six who began the program three completed the program. Michelle only attended the first session. Michelle suffered from chronic pain and shared that she couldn't sit for two hours. After attempts to accommodate her, she never returned to the group. Jessica withdrew from the program after session four when she transitioned out of the shelter. Jessica had a physical disability requiring her to use a wheelchair. For her to get to and from the group, Handi-Transit would have to provide transportation. After failed attempts to organize this, Jessica decided to withdraw from the program. Finally, Rebecca only attended seven sessions. Before session eight, Rebecca shared that she had a conflict with Jane outside of the group and did not want to be in the group with her anymore. My co-facilitator and I attempted to help mediate a discussion to resolve this conflict. However, Rebecca had no interest in trying to discuss or resolve the issue that occurred with Jane.

Before the first session of group two, four participants were living together with two women coming from the community. In group two, we experienced the benefits of a smaller group size. Each woman had more time and space to share. However, transportation to and from the shelter for HAP was a barrier for both Julie and Heaven who were living in the community.

After careful reflection, I realized that coming back to the setting (YWCA Genevra House) for the group after participants had transitioned out would be difficult for some women. For some, coming back to this setting for the group was emotionally challenging, especially after they had transitioned out and started living independently in the community.

In the recruitment stage, most women living in the shelter expressed their concerns about moving out before the 12-week program ended. At this time, we assured them that if they were set to transition out before completing the program, they were welcomed to return for the group. I did not foresee returning as a potential barrier for HAP participation. However, Julie and Heaven both missed four sessions of the 12-week program. The lowest number of sessions attended by a group member from group two was seven sessions.

All four women that did not complete the program were contacted in attempts to arrange an alternate time for them to complete the measures and participate in a one-on-one follow up interview; however, none of these women responded. Thus, we concluded the study with completed data collection from 10 participants in total. The women attributed two primary motives behind their decision to participate in the HAP. First, most women desired to address mental health challenges and well-being. Secondly, participants wanted an opportunity to connect with other women. Examples of mental health challenges included symptoms of depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Moreover, promoting well-being by reducing stress was the most prominent desire amongst participants. Examples of identified stressors were ex-partners, children's aid, court, community living, shelter rules, and regulations, transitioning into housing, health, family, and finances.

Maladaptive ways of responding to stress included repressing emotions, avoidance, catastrophic thinking, negative self-judgment, the judgment of other women, high reactivity to

emotions, keeping busy, and smoking. Adaptive ways of responding to stress included talking to someone, seeking counseling, helping other women, taking care of the mind and body, finding a hobby, getting out in nature, staying positive, visiting family, feeling and communicating your emotions, walking away from conflict, volunteering, yoga, breathing techniques, and grounding meditations.

Four out of 14 women had a basic understanding of mindfulness pre-group. Understanding of mindfulness included the connection between mind and body, being present in the moment, awareness, and compassion. These women hoped mindfulness could help them be more present at the moment and increase emotional regulation. Most of the women hoped the HAP could help them learn new coping skills, improve emotional regulation, be present, gain self-awareness, shift thinking patterns, and practice letting go.

Additionally, four women shared how they felt as if they had no control over their lives, including external and internal experiences. Nevertheless, they were open to learning new ways to cope. Three women mentioned how this was something they could do for themselves, instead of always giving to others. A few others said they were interested in finding positivity, gaining self-confidence, independence, and trying to trust people again.

A second motive offered for participating in this study consisted of gaining peer support. Five of the women had previous group work experience in other community programs and wanted to experience the benefits again. Four of the women wanted to connect with other women. A few women also mentioned needing a safe, welcoming space to express themselves, and an opportunity to open up and connect with other women. Finally, some women acknowledged that they experienced the benefits of connecting with other women by forming informal social groups within the shelter. For example, socializing around the picnic table

smoking or having a coffee with other women. As a result, they were interested in building new connections in a more private and formal setting.

Procedure: HAP Facilitation

Before delivering HAP for my research study, I was trained in Dr. Coholic's arts-based mindfulness group program (HAP) with youth in the Multidisciplinary Qualitative Research Lab (MQRL) at Laurentian University by participating in and co-facilitating a group with youths. At YWCA Genevra House, I co-facilitated both groups alongside other facilitators training in Dr. Coholic's research program/lab. Women participating were required to commit to two hours per week for 12 weeks as well as participate in two group interviews and complete two quantitative measures, both pre- and post-group.

This program was implemented to offer a variety of strengths-based and important helping methods to teach mindfulness-based practice and concepts. The group's focus was to engage in arts-based mindfulness activities that explored participants' feelings, thoughts, and behaviors, and develop their strengths. The overall goal of the group was to bring the women together in a safe, non-judgmental environment where they can feel better about themselves, understand themselves better, build coping skills, improve resilience, and gain self-awareness. Before the onset of the group sessions, participants were asked to sign a consent form for participation and photography of their art. Upon completion and understanding of consents, the group sessions began once per week for 12 consecutive weeks. I photographed the participants' body of art-works. Each 2-hour session of HAP consists of 4-8 arts-based mindfulness activities with one primer (ice breaker) activity and one closing activity. Halfway through each session, food is provided during a 15-minute break. All activities were strengths-based. This format was

directly based on Dr. Coholic's manualized program, which was followed for the full duration of the study (Coholic, 2019).

Activities used in the Holistic Arts-Based Program may include "drawing, painting, sculpting with clay, listening to guided imageries, and creative writing" (Coholic & Loughed, 2016, p.158) designed to teach participants mindfulness concepts in accessible and engaging ways. For example, the Thoughts Jar is used to teach the concept of mindfulness. It demonstrates what our minds look like when we are overly stressed or feeling anxious. We use a clear jar, half filled with water, and pass it around the circle of participants who are each invited to indicate thought or feeling represented by beads, and dropping these colorful beads, one at a time into the jar. Once everyone has had a turn, the lid is secured, and the jar with beads is shaken. While all the beads are swirling around in the agitated water, participants are asked if they think they could make good decisions if their thoughts and emotions in their minds, looked like the beads swirling around in the jar. Then, once the jar is set down on the table, and the beads settle to the top or bottom of the jar, the concept of mindfulness is discussed. The thoughts and feelings are still present, in the jar of water, but they are easier to identify and focus on when they are settled. This experiential exercise offers participants a chance to discuss how mindfulness can be an effective strategy to help them understand their thoughts and emotions so that they can make better decisions. See Appendix D for a one-page handout describing this activity.

Another arts-based activity, Painting on a Line, teaches to not focus so much on the final product but the process of doing something fun and creative in the moment. We had a line of string hung from one side of the room to the other where one piece of paper for each group member is hung from the line with clothespins. Each participant is encouraged to paint something without holding the paper with their hands. Once everyone has completed their art

and returned to their seat, participants are asked what feelings arose during this activity. Typically, some participants' express frustration or irritation. If these feelings were experienced, we would connect this activity to adapting your expectations in a challenging situation and the importance of being in the present moment. See Appendix E for a one-page handout describing this activity. For an illustrated HAP session structure and more examples of activities, see Appendix F.

Researcher Reflexivity

Researcher reflexivity is applied in this study to help contextualize knowledge and enhance the trustworthiness, transparency, and accountability of this research. My background, values, beliefs, and attitudes have played a part in my research. Qualitative research methods offer tremendous rich data collected through interviews and observations but at the cost of subjectivity. I hope that by adding reflection to my study, the reader will have more knowledge about who conducted, interpreted, analyzed, and shared the research in an attempt to illustrate how my research process was trustworthy. Reflection on how one impacts all aspects of the research process is a necessary step to "better understand the role of the self in the creation of knowledge" by carefully self-monitoring the impacts of my own biases, beliefs, and personal experiences on this research (Berger, 2015, p. 220).

I am a 25-year old woman, raised in a Catholic middle-class family in Sudbury, Ontario, currently in the process of completing a Master of Social Work at Laurentian University. I am the third of three girls. My parents have always supported and encouraged me in my educational pursuits. My mother taught me the most powerful lesson of all, how to love, how to care for others and lead with compassion. My father taught me the importance of hard work and leadership. He taught me to see people; to acknowledge everyone's presence and how to engage

and communicate with others. Together, they modeled and instilled within me a genuine interest in, and care for, people. While I was in middle school, my parents divorced. The way my parents handled this problematic situation taught me valuable life lessons. They always put us first and upheld the utmost respect for one another. To this day, we have never heard our parents say a negative comment about each other. Because of this, I learned that having respect for one another in challenging situations is the most important thing.

My passion for helping people and facilitating positive change in my community was influenced by my parents' love, work, and dedication. The lessons they have taught me has helped shape my worldview. All that I have learned from them, I know, have influenced this research. From the beginning of the research process, I have brought my curiosity to the forefront, passion in the pursuit of social justice, and respect for the dignity and worth of persons. I also brought my ability to understand and relate to people with empathy.

I pursued my Master in Social Work to positively impact the lives of the people within my community and initiate change. I wanted to explore the needs of my community to ensure that services and supports are available and accessible to all. At my workplace, YWCA (Young Women's Christian Association) Genevra House, a shelter for women escaping intimate partner violence (IPV), I noticed that programs for women were not made available. During my research methods course, my professor, Dr. Diana Coholic, shared her research exploring the benefits of arts-based mindfulness group work for the improvement of resilience and self-esteem in marginalized children and youth. At this time, I remember thinking to myself; this program is what Genevra House needs. In class, I shared my interest with Dr. Coholic in offering this program to women at my work. This opportunity aligned perfectly with what I am passionate about; community, mental health, and helping and empowering women.

My passion for community stated at a young age. Since both my parents are of French heritage, most of my family traditions are influenced by French Canadian culture. My culture and belief system helped shape my identity as well as my values, which emphasize the importance of community and family and reinforces the right to access French services. At a young age, I recognized that I am a part of a linguistic minority in our community. With this also came the realization that there were so many other social inequities. This recognition led to action. I spent many evenings at our local church, part of a volunteer group that prepared and served meals for the homeless. This experience enlightened me that the problem is much bigger than most perceive it to be. Growing up in a middle-class family, I didn't experience this firsthand. However, I understood this disadvantage and the impact it had on the well-being of these individuals and families. Being involved in my community at such a young age has brought me to my research; volunteering provided me with the desire to have a purpose and to connect to things bigger than myself. Being engaged in my community gave me perspective and meaning, and it connected me to others.

My passion for mental health ignited from my personal experiences within my own family. Since adolescence, my sisters and I have all struggled with anxiety and depression. My parents experienced much stress with regards to our mental health. I intended to reduce my parent's stress by repressing my negative feelings so I could be proactive in supporting them. Both my sisters are more open about their mental health challenges. I had a lot of misconceptions about their vulnerability. For so long, I viewed sharing challenges about anxiety or depression as a weakness. I was afraid to be judged or treated differently if I opened up. For me, ‘strong' meant full independence and perfection. In retrospect, suppressing my emotions and putting on this facade only isolated me further, pushing all my loved ones away. My tireless pursuit of

perfectionism and independence only increased my suffering, making it extremely difficult for me to open up and connect with others. My sisters helped challenge my definition of ‘strength,' and how important it is to look at any person or issue holistically through a mental-health lens. Today, I understand vulnerability and transparency as ways of being that takes the most considerable amount of courage and strength. This personal experience has brought me to my research because I understand how important is it to talk about mental health.

My passion for helping and empowering women started when my ability to develop confidence and pride was hindered by the fact that I was judged on my looks as opposed to being recognized for my abilities. In Catholic high school, female students were treated as less capable and valuable than our male counterparts. As girls, we were told to sit, dress, talk, and think narrow-mindedly; while receiving a constant serving of shame and guilt. I was enraged with the limits the school imposed upon our potential as young, vibrant, and brilliant women. Towards the end of my senior year, I remember the taste of freedom; I left with something to prove to myself. I had spent so much time trying to fit into a particular mold, that I was now unable to be told what to do, distinguishing my rights from my wrongs outside of the broader Catholic moral compass.

After graduation, my post-secondary education in social work ignited a passion for social justice and gender equality. Throughout my BSW program, I learned how to think for myself and resist these social pressures critically. I gained more awareness and knowledge and learned how to advocate for myself and prioritize my own needs. Social work reintroduced me to my values; belief in the dignity and worth of persons, the importance of human relationships, and being a service to others in my community.

My passion for empowering women has been the most instrumental in the development of this research. I think it is right that as a woman, I am paid the same as my male counterparts. I believe it is right that I should be able to make decisions about my own body. I believe it is right that women be involved on my behalf in the policies and decision-making of my country. I think it is right that socially, I am afforded the same respect as men. These rights I consider to be human rights, but I am one of the lucky ones. My life is a sheer privilege because my parents did not limit me because I was a girl. My mentors didn't assume I would go less far because I am a woman.

Working at YWCA Genevra House, I recognized that not all other women receive the same privilege. Moreover, women residing at Genevra House don’t have a safe space to talk. Two staff members are always available to residents; however, with over 30 women and 15 children in the house, time and support offered to each woman is limited. Canadian surveys of women survivors of IPV have rated shelters and support groups amongst the most effective helping resources, yet funding for creative support programs are cut annually (Tutty, 2011).

As a shelter support worker at YWCA Genevra House, I have experienced physical exhaustion, high stress, compassion-fatigue, and feelings of helplessness which have directly affected my efficiency at work. Working with survivors of abuse is difficult, painful, and challenging. As I noticed the burnout rates of my colleagues, I knew I had to get creative to avoid burning out. To maintain my work efficiency and protect my overall health, I needed to find a way to change the way I responded to stress and the negativity of this environment. One way I tried to change the atmosphere at work was to show more gratitude at work, a concept grounded in a mindful philosophy and practice. Gratitude successfully protected me from the

stress and negativity while enabling me to radiate a different type of energy to my co-workers and residents at the shelter.

Although I do consider myself to be a positive person, someone who enjoys making people smile, I don't experience vast amounts of joy every moment of my day. More importantly, mindfulness is not about being happy all the time; it's about cultivating awareness, which can offer liberation from suffering. At work, the awareness cultivated through my practice helped me hold stress and negativity differently. Instead of resisting these experiences by pushing them away, I could welcome them in. As I held these emotions differently my experiences of them started to shift. Mindfulness allowed me to embrace the stress and negativity which in turn allowed me to better regulate the associated emotions.

Being mindful allowed me to regulate feelings of frustration, stress, or fatigue at work. Instead, I was able to work calmly and effectively, understand conflicts more logically, and approach then more positively. For example, if a woman didn't return in time for curfew, the narrative might be about lack of bed availability or frustrations surrounding women not following rules and regulations. By being mindful, I was better equipped to think critically and holistically about this issue, and shifted the narrative by voicing my concerns for her safety.

Being mindful is more than gratitude and positivity. However, these ways of being in the world helped me create space between feeling and reacting. In this space, I could choose to spread joy and compassion. Being mindful at work also helped me form helping relationships more effectively. Through this energy, authenticity naturally arose. Being genuine and authentic brings rewards. It allows you to live up to your fullest potential, actively listen to others with empathy, and make them feel heard. Indeed, some suggest that presence, empathy, and

compassion are critical to a productive therapeutic relationship (Geller & Greenberg, 2002; McDonough-Means, Kreitzer, & Bell, 2004).

Therapeutic presence has been defined as having three components: "an availability and openness to all aspects of the client's experience, openness to one's own experience in being with the client, and the capacity to respond to the client from this experience" (Geller & Greenberg, 2002, p. 72). My presence allowed me to connect with others more effectively, open my mind, and pass fewer judgments. Being true to myself, when working with women survivors was especially beneficial because the relationships were built on trust and respect. These types of relationships helped create a pathway for women to develop skills and capacities. A path that didn't have to be a stressful or negative experience.

My mindfulness practice helped me mitigate the adverse effects of my stress at work and connect more effectively with the women we were helping by shifting my mindset from negative to positive. From my experience, the literature describing the shelter environment as controlling, intimidating, and isolating can be real, for residents and staff members of emergency shelters. Ultimately, I wanted to create a space where I can continue to show gratitude and joy. Space where women can come together in a positive and meaningful way. Areas where they could be authentic, connect, and empower one another all while learning concepts which would ultimately support their personal growth and development.

At work, residents continued to approach my co-worker and me individually with their needs and concerns. I realized that most of these women were experiencing the same stressors and challenges. However, no group work was in place to provide an opportunity to share or connect. Ultimately, I wanted to bring these women together. I wanted to create a support group

where they could to connect and empower each other while learning concepts supporting personal development and growth.

Before delivering HAP for my research study, I gained experience facilitating Dr. Coholic's arts-based mindfulness group program with youth in the Multidisciplinary Qualitative Research Lab (MQRL) at Laurentian University. My initial intent for learning HAP was to develop a deeper understanding of mindfulness concepts and how to teach these concepts through art in a group setting.

Beyond facilitation, HAP offered me valuable ways to heal from my own painful emotions such as those experienced within my family and high school education. Repressed feelings such as anger, guilt, and shame were uncovered throughout my participation in HAP. I learned to explore these difficult emotions with self-compassion, acceptance, and vulnerability. For example, opening up for me was less challenging in HAP because the art was an invitation to express what you were feeling, followed by invitation to share. This nonjudgmental approach was different from any conventional talk therapy I've experienced. The art-based methods are engaging and inviting: they were a way to share what you didn't have the courage to say.

Participation in HAP helped me develop a better understanding of mindfulness practice. Mindfulness has become instrumental in freeing me from destructive thoughts and emotions and in connecting and building stronger relationships. My mindfulness practice created a pathway to self-compassion. Instead of suppressing difficult emotions, I could allow myself to experience them non-judgmentally. Being kind to myself also allowed me to connect and listen to my body, ultimately fostering the healthiest relationship I’ve ever had with my mind and body. Self-hatred and perfectionism evolved to self-love and compassion.

The non-judgmental attitude I have developed through my mindfulness practice was instrumental in this research project. Women survivors of IPV are often full of negative self-judgment. To challenge this negativity, we needed to create a safe, non-judgmental space where women felt safe engaging in the activities to identify and share their thoughts and feelings.

Demonstrating vulnerability by acknowledging my struggle with self-critical thoughts, along with my journey of learning mindfulness contributed to the creation of a safe place where participants felt they could open up and share painful thoughts and emotions. In the group, we taught concepts such as self-awareness, acceptance, and self-compassion. These concepts were helpful when trying to address painful feelings that were often suppressed to cope or to survive. The art-based methods utilized in HAP helped offer women alternative ways of expressing themselves. The powerful use of the group provided participants peer support and fostered a sense of belonging during a critical turning point in their lives.

It is essential to recognize the interconnectedness and interrelationships that existed and evolved throughout the research process. My primary role was that of student researcher and facilitator of HAP. However, being a shelter support worker at YWCA Genevra House, provided me with a unique perspective in facilitating HAP with the women. From beginning to end, I was highly aware of how the many roles I played affected my interpretations of the groups' success.

Before the first session, I talked openly to the women in both groups about my multiple roles (e.g., shelter support worker, co-facilitator of HAP, and a student researcher). Drawing clear boundaries between the functions and roles were set during this time. For example, I made it clear that when I was co-facilitating, I wasn't on shift at the shelter. This meant that any services/support they required during group must be re-directed to the support workers. Before our first session, the topic of confidentiality was also discussed. While referencing back to the

consents, I made it clear that any information they shared in the group was confidential. Thus, anything shared in the group would never be used for or against them in my other role as shelter support. Nevertheless, I did experience a variety of challenges in managing these different roles. Often wearing many 'hats' can be challenging to keep the roles separate. The reviews and approval of the Laurentian University's Research Ethics Board (LUREB) on this research study helped manage boundaries and relationships. Through informed consent processes, all women were aware of their rights and did not feel undue pressure to participate based on previous therapeutic relationships we may have built.

For my role as a co-facilitator, hearing shelter complaints in group was challenging. As a facilitator I didn't want the shelter complaints to dominate the group process. However, as a shelter support worker, I wanted to give them the opportunity to express their thoughts, feelings and emotions about living in the shelter. Responding to shelter complaints in group was often difficult because my ability to advocate for them was limited in my role as a facilitator. Furthermore, the gained sense of trust women had towards me was another challenge. Towards the end of the 12-week program, during my work hours on a few occasions, women participants would ask to speak with me instead of my co-worker on shift. Another challenge I had experienced was stepping back into my role as a shelter support worker soon after co-facilitating group. For example, often I would work the evening shift 5pm-1am then co-facilitate group one at 9 am the following morning, or I would work dayshift 9am-5pm and co-facilitate group two 6pm-8pm. Beyond the physical exhaustion, this short time frame was challenging to compartmentalize the different roles mentally. Time and space between these roles allowed me to be more productive and present in both.

Overall, the most salient tensions are that between the care and control functions of these roles. The care function refers to my obligation as a support worker to help and protect the women I serve. The control function refers to my responsibility to enforce specific shelter rules and regulations. As Beckett and Maynard (2005) note, social work both advocates for individual rights and protects the collective good. This dual role often placed me in a situation in which I was caught between the interest of the women and the interest of my agency as a whole. For example, in week six, Tracy, one of the women participants, was at risk of being asked to leave the shelter for displaying aggressive behaviors towards staff. During group, she expressed the amount of stress she was feeling. At times, I felt powerless in the facilitator and researcher roles. I wanted to advocate for her as a shelter support worker. However, this created tension because I was caught in between the interest of Tracy and the interests of my co-workers who didn't always feel safe with Tracy's unpredictable behaviors. In group, we got to see another side of Tracy as she was calm, grounded, attentive, and very responsive to the activities we did throughout the 12-week program. Often, I wised others had the opportunity to see how Tracy was in group compared to how she could be in the shelter.

Furthermore, the fact that the women viewed me in this dual role of care and control created some challenges because they may have regarded my researcher and co-facilitator roles as someone who can provide them with 'care' and my shelter support role as someone who can exercise 'control' functions in the shelter. According to a few studies, the views of dual roles in research can result in an unrealistic expectation of the researcher (Antly & Regehr, 2003; Yassour-Borocho, 2004). In my case with Tracy, her asking me to further assist her after group by executing my 'control' in my shelter support role wasn't feasible. Since I wasn't involved in the incidences that occurred between her and staff, I couldn't interfere with the interventions that

were scheduled to follow with management. However, I did encourage my colleague to see that her behaviors were related to the stress she was experiencing at the time; stress she may learn to manage more effectively in group.

Despite these challenges, throughout this entire research, my multiple roles appear to have had a positive impact on the study overall. As a qualitative researcher, one of my responsibilities is to attempt to access the thoughts and feelings of study participants. In addition to having field notes that provided valuable context to the interpretation of pre- and post-group interviews, before the research started, I had situational context about each of the study participants. Also, beyond context, I had awareness and sensitivity to the abuse the women experienced before accessing our shelter. In my data analysis, this awareness helped me be true to the participants; true to their voices that I was trying to hear so that the experiences of the women can be reported adequately. The knowledge I had, enabled me to look at the data with curiosity, familiarity, and passion. This previous experience and knowledge of women's experiences before participating in HAP also helped me co-facilitate the program more effectively.

Knowing part of their stories, motivated me to be the best facilitator I could be so that women could benefits as much as they could from HAP. In the group, women were telling us stories that many had never told anyone before. The trust we developed and the safe non-judgmental space we created through HAP helped women open-up and listen to each other differently. Moreover, the equalitarian approach to HAP lessened the power differential I was used to seeing between worker and resident. In HAP, facilitators participated in all the activities with group members. In this approach, the power differential women may have experienced within the shelter was lessened. Finally, being a researcher and co-facilitator in this study helped

me become a better shelter support worker. Bearing witness to the self-awareness, strength, vulnerability, and resiliency of these women inspired me to be the best version of myself on a personal and professional level.

The actualization of facilitating HAP to women survivors of IPV for my research provided a foundation for my personal growth. As much as I am studying the experiences of the HAP on women survivor of IPV, I simultaneously embarked on a self-exploration to reveal my contributions to the research and how my pre-existing and ever-changing self has influenced and will continue to shape the research process. It is important to note that my study allowed me to do something for the strongest most courageous women I know. All of the women at Genevra House have the same desires and abilities as I. Only they sat in a shelter and had no voice. They worried about their safety, the safety of their children, and if they would ever build a life free of violence. I don't know why I'm in this position today, and they aren't, but I wanted to do the best I could with my research to help them reclaim their voice. Bearing witness to the strength, openness, and resiliency of the women in the HAP was an honor I will never forget.

Data Collection and Analysis

Qualitative Data Collection

According to Onwuegbuzie, Dickinson, Leech, and Zoran (2009), focus groups are an economical, fast, and efficient method for obtaining data from multiple participants. In this study, the qualitative data was collected through group interviews conducted pre- and post-HAP. Subjectivity related to participant's opinions, expectations, personal or cultural understanding, and beliefs were considered in this research. Further, a mixed method approach was used to allow for triangulation, which helped me procure a comprehensive analysis of the findings.

Group interviews were used in this research because groups mirrored the community setting of Genevra House as well as the HAP group process. Being in a group setting with other women is part of community living. Consequently, group interviews would foster a sense of familiarity and comfort. Especially post-group as participants can hear about different experiences and build on their experience. Focus groups also put less pressure on each participant, making it easier to facilitate discussion about perceptions, ideas, opinions, and thoughts (Onwuegbuzie, Dickinson, Leech, & Zoran, 2009). This being said, the use of semi-structured group interviews probably impacted data collection since participants were influenced by the responses of the other group members. This was evident in the interviews as a few participants would agree with or expand upon what other group members contributed. Although the group interviews can limit the possibility of in-depth discussion on one particular issue, interviewing participants in a group format made it possible to "solicit a number of opinions and feedback on multiples topics" (Smithson, 2000, p. 104) without the time-intensive process of conducting individual interviews.

During the group interviews, questions were poised to the entire group and open for anyone to respond (see Appendix G for example questions). Although this interview technique may have motivated more outspoken participants to contribute more, the interviewers encouraged responses from all participants by creating a safe, inclusive environment and allowing time for individuals to respond. To minimize my influence, I did not attend either the pre- or post-group interviews.

Participants attended two group discussions: the first pre-group interview was held immediately before the first group session began, and was conducted to establish participants' experience with and prior knowledge of mindfulness as well as their reason for choosing to

attend the program. The second post-group interview followed immediately after the final session ended and was conducted to determine the participants' experiences of attending the HAP, their understanding of mindfulness after participation, and if they would use what they learned going forward in their own lives. These group interview sessions did not exceed one hour in duration. Two of the three students that co-facilitated the program with me conducted the two pre-group interviews sessions. For the post-group interviews, each student individually interviewed the group they co-facilitated.

Participants' body of art was photographed by me and presented at the interviews so that they were easily accessible for discussion points. Before participants started the interview, they were reminded that they could discontinue at any time and did not have to answer questions that made them uncomfortable. Additional support in the shelter was offered to participants if the interview or participation triggered emotional distress beyond the scope of the group, although, to the best of our knowledge, no women needed this extra support.

Group interviews were audio recorded using a digital audio recorder; the audio was initially recorded on a memory card. For confidential purposes, once the recording was securely transferred to a computer for transcription, the original audio was deleted from the memory card and recorder. The transcriptions were stored on a computer in the lab where they were password protected and only accessible by the researcher. Hard copies of the consent forms were kept in a double-locked cabinet in the locked lab at the university.

Qualitative Data Analysis

Qualitative data were then analyzed using the thematic analysis approach, which is an ideal method for an exploratory study to identify patterns and themes that are rich in participant voice (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In the thematic analysis, data sets are analyzed to determine

trends that can highlight thematic findings through multiple coding procedures (Braun & Clarke 2006). Researchers first become familiar with the dataset, conduct initial coding, search for and review themes, define themes, and then produce findings (Braun & Clarke 2006). To become familiar with the data, I transcribed the interviews. After the interviews were transcribed, I re-read the transcripts to be familiar with the data, paying attention to possible themes. I printed out copies of all the transcriptions to start hard copy coding.

The first phase of coding consisted of inductive, independent, open, line-by-line coding to establish concepts and categories within the data (Clarke & Braun 2013). I slowly read each line initially using a pen to identify codes using different mechanisms to differentiate the codes such as circling, boxing, and underlying. Then I would add notes about the data in the margins of the document; I identified approximately 90 codes that I repeatedly reviewed, sorted, categorized, and collapsed until they had been reduced to 13 codes.

Once all the data was coded, I reviewed and analyzed the list looking for patterns and relationships between them (Braun & Clark, 2006). The second phase involved coding concepts and categories in creating themes and subthemes (Clarke & Braun 2013). In the final stage of coding, initial themes were organized, so related concepts were grouped to contribute to answering the area of inquiry.

This analysis resulted in the preliminary construction of four consistent initial themes. I discussed this analysis with my supervisor to further refine and develop the main themes. My supervisor helped resolve discrepancies in the coding phase, collapsing my initial four themes into three main themes. When the major themes were established, I compared the themes, integrating them further, and then created a thematic map (Braun & Clark, 2007). Using the thematic map, I could compose a clear, detailed definition of each major theme to tell a logical

story about the data. The three main themes are (1) Benefits of learning mindfulness-based concepts/skills, (2) Benefits of art-based experimental methods and (3) Benefits of strength-based group work. In the thematic map, I integrated subthemes to offer additional support to help organize the three main themes (Braun & Clark, 2006). I discuss these themes in-depth in the following chapter.

Quantitative Data Collection

Analysis of pre-and post-group scores included self-reported measures from the Perceived Stress Scale (PSS) (see Appendix H) and the Five Facet Mindfulness Questionnaire (FFMQ) (see Appendix I). The Perceived Stress Scale (PSS), is a well-known psychological self-report for measuring the perception of stress. This tool consists of 10 items that are designed to measure how unpredictable, uncontrollable, and overloaded participants find their lives. It uses a Likert scale ranging from zero to four, where participants are asked about feelings and thoughts. Examples of some PSS scale items include Item 1: “In the last month, how often have you been upset because of something that happened unexpectedly?” Item 2: “In the last month, how often have you felt that you were unable to control the important things in your life?” and Item 3: “In the last month, how often have you felt nervous and “stressed?”

PSS scores are obtained by reversing responses (e.g., 0 = 4, 1 = 3, 2 = 2, 3 = 1 & 4 = 0) to the four positively stated items (items 4, 5, 7, & 8) and then summing across all scale items. A short 4-item scale can be made from questions 2, 4, 5 and 10 of the PSS 10 item scale. The higher the score, the higher the level of perceived stress. The test took approximately 10 minutes to complete. The PSS was selected for use in this research study because it was easily accessible online, gratuitous, and it is one of the more commonly used measures to assess perceived stress (Ingram, Clarke & Lichtenberg, 2016).

According to Cohen (2011), the Perceived Stress Scale (PSS) is the most widely used psychological instrument for measuring the perception of stress. It is a measure of the degree to which situations in one's life are appraised as stressful. Items were designed to tap how unpredictable, uncontrollable, and overloaded respondents find their lives. The scale also includes many direct queries about current levels of experienced stress. The PSS was designed for use in community samples with at least a junior high school education. The items are easy to understand, and the response alternatives are simple to grasp. Moreover, the questions are general and hence are relatively free of content specific to any subpopulation group.

Cohen and Williamson (1988) reported that scores on the PSS-10 demonstrated adequate internal consistency reliability, moderate concurrent criterion validity with the amount of stress experienced during an average week. Since then, other studies have similarly reported that the PSS-10 has excellent internal consistency reliability (e.g. Barbosa-Leiker et al., 2013; Golden-Kreutz et al., 2004; Reis et al., 2010) and adequate convergent validity based on associations with measures of physical and mental health (e.g. Mitchell et al., 2008; Roberti et al., 2006; Wu and Amtmann, 2013).

The Five Facet Mindfulness Questionnaire (FFMQ) is a psychometric instrument that was developed by Ruth Baer at the University of Kentucky based on a factor analytic study of five independently developed mindfulness questionnaires. The analysis yielded five factors that appear to represent elements of mindfulness as it is currently conceptualized. The five facets of mindfulness include observing, describing, acting with awareness, non-judging of inner experience, and non-reactivity to inner experience. Observing refers to attending or noticing internal and external experiences (e.g., thoughts, emotions, bodily sensations, sounds, smells).

Describing includes the ability to express in words one's experiences. Acting with awareness involves attending to one's present moment activity, rather than being on "autopilot," while attention is focused elsewhere. Nonjudging of inner experience involves accepting and not evaluating thoughts and emotions (e.g., as "good" or "bad"). Finally, nonreactivity to inner experience refers to the ability to detach from thoughts and emotions, allowing them to come and go without getting involved or carried away by them. Thirty-nine test items using a 5-point Likert scale was used to measure how participants feel about each statement provided (Baer et al., 2008). Examples of some FFMQ items include, Item 1 "When I'm walking, I deliberately notice the sensations of my body moving", Item 2 "I notice the smells and aromas of things" (observing), Item 3 "I'm good at finding words to describe my feelings" (describing), Item 4 "I find myself doing things without paying attention" (acting with awareness), Item 5 "I disapprove of myself when I have illogical ideas" (non-judging), and Item 6 "When I have distressing thoughts or images, I do not let myself be carried away by them" (non-reactivity).

Facet scores range from 8−40, except for the nonreactivity facet, which ranges from 7−35. For all facets, higher scores represent higher levels of mindfulness. Many research studies have reinforced the well-established idea in Buddhist meditation traditions (Goldstein & Kornfield, 1987), that meditation practice cultivates increased mindfulness in daily life, which in turns facilitates well-being.

To further investigate the reliability of the FFMQ, one study compared the FFMQ results in meditating and nonmeditating samples. Four of the facets (all but acting with awareness) were significantly correlated with meditation experience (even with other demographic variables controlled), and meditators scored significantly higher than in other samples (Baer, et al., 2011). Expected relationships between mindfulness facets and symptoms and well-being were found in

most cases, including relationships that vary with meditation experience for the observing facet. The hierarchical five-factor structure was confirmed in the meditating sample, and several of the facets significantly mediated the relationship between meditation experience and wellbeing. Although increased mindfulness scores in experienced meditators have been seen with the MAAS (Brown & Ryan, 2003) and the Toronto Mindfulness Scale (Lau et al., 2006), this mediational relationship has not previously been shown. Also, no significant relationship was found between meditation experience and the acting with awareness facet. This facet was significantly correlated with the other facets and with symptoms and well-being in the expected directions. However, in Baer's (2011) sample, high level of education included few individuals with short-term meditation experience. Thus, it is possible that education cultivates the ability to act with awareness, or that individuals who pursue more education have higher levels of this skill, and that meditation adds little to the effects of education. The relationship between this facet and meditation experience may be significant in samples of beginner meditators. Overall, results suggest that meditation cultivates several mindfulness skills, and these skills, as measured by the FFMQ, encourage positive psychological functioning in long-term practitioners (Baer, 2011).

Another study by Medvedev et al. (2017) found a positive correlation between the FFMQ scores (overall and subscales) and well-being, emotional intelligence, and self-compassion, and a negative correlation between the FFMQ scores and illnesses and characteristics that negatively impact an individual's well-being such as depression, anxiety, and dissociation, supporting construct validity. The FFMQ was chosen for this study because it is the most widely used self-reporting measure of dispositional mindfulness. The FFMQ has also proven to be valid and

reliable with meditator and nonmeditator samples. This measure is also quickly accessible online, and gratuitous (Baer et al. 2008).

Quantitative Data Analysis

I hypothesized that women who participated in the HAP program would experience an increase in mindfulness and a reduction in perceived stress. Paired t-tests were used to compare the means of the two samples of related data scores from the two measurements taken before (pre) and after (post) participation in the program and were entered into the Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) software to achieve summary data. While scores on the mindfulness scale increased and scores on the perceived stress scale decreased, the quantitative analysis of both measures did not prove to be statistically significant. The PSS results dropped from pre- to post-group (see Table 1 below). The FFMQ results showed an increase in mindfulness from pre- to post-participation (see Table 2 below). More details exploring the quantitative findings will be described in the next chapter.

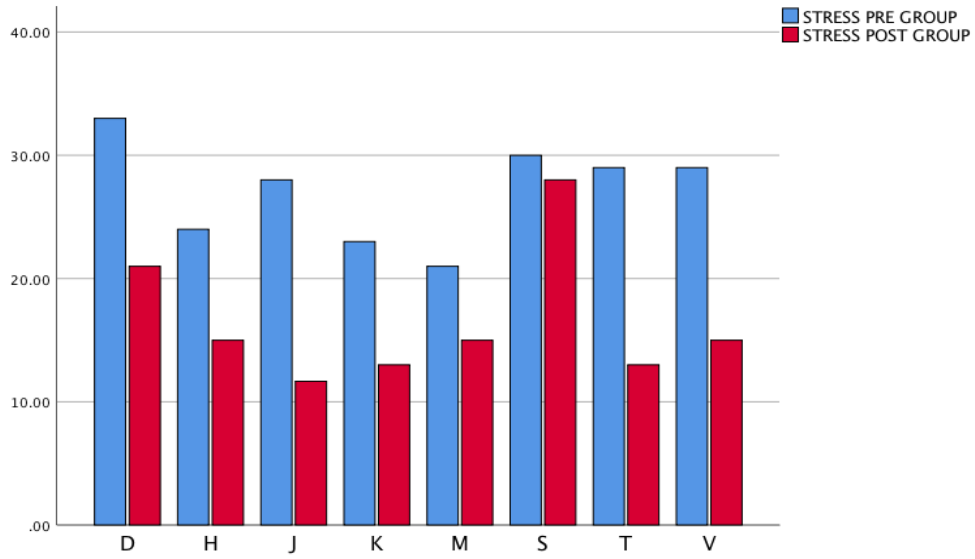

Table 1: Perceived Stress Scale (PSS) Results Table

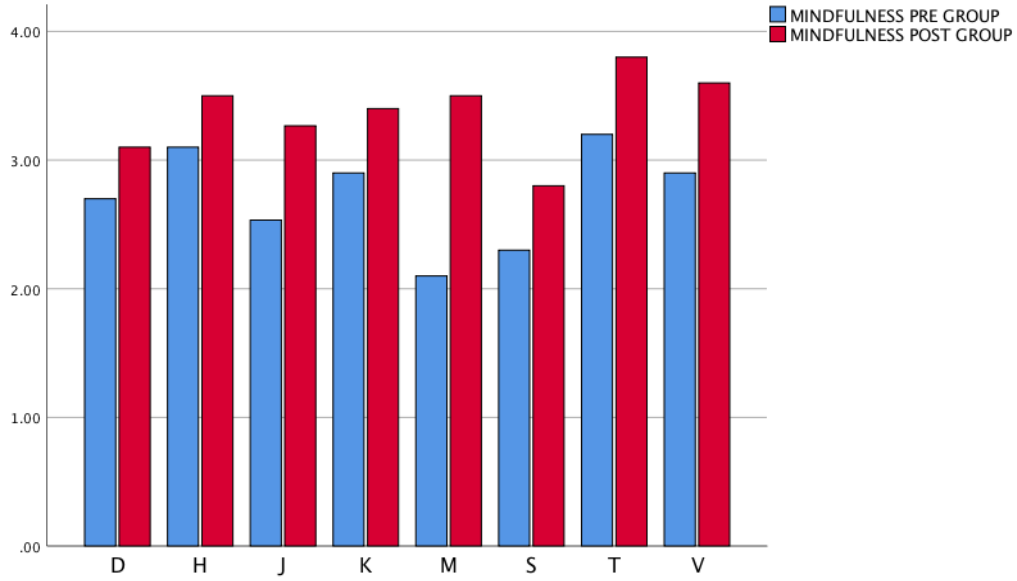

Table 2: Five Facet Mindfulness Questionnaire (FFQ) Results Table

The results from pre- and post-HAP scores on the PSS indicate a decrease in perceived stress. All 10 participants who completed the program reported lower levels of stress post-HAP than pre-HAP on the stress measure. However, the paired t-test performed on the data collected from the PSS produced a p-value of .268. Thus, the result is not statistically significant. The results from pre- and post-HAP scores on the FFMQ scale indicate an increase in mindfulness. All 10 participants who completed the program reported higher levels of mindfulness post-HAP than pre-HAP on the mindfulness measure. The paired t-test performed on the data collected from the FFMQ produced a p-value of .099. These results also indicated no statistically significant change on the FFMQ ($p > .05$).

Statistical significance is the probability that the observed difference between the two groups is due to chance. If the P value is larger than the alpha level chosen (e.g., .05), any observed difference is assumed to be explained by sampling variability (Sullivan & Feinn, 2012).

However, the small sample size (n=10) reduces the statistical power of the findings and limits the interpretation of the results and analysis. This does not mean that there was no effect of mindfulness arts-based interventions. Overall, the quantitative data results suggest that participation in HAP increased participants reported level of mindfulness and decreased their reported perceived stress levels. However, the study should be replicated with a larger sample size and control groups to estimate the actual impact of this intervention for this population. Perhaps more importantly, given the small sample size, it is essential to note that the quantitative data analysis is convergent with the qualitative data analysis.

Ethical Considerations

As a member of the Ontario College of Social Workers and Social Service Workers (OCSWSSW), ethical standards, especially in research, are at the core of social work practice. According to Peled and Leichtentritt (2002), ethical standards in social work research include voluntary participation without coercion, informed consent, avoiding potential harm or distress to participants, and protection of participants' confidentiality. Ethical approval from Laurentian University was obtained on July 9th, 2018, through submission to the Laurentian University Ethics Review Board for research involving human subjects (see Appendix J). I ensured adherence with informed consent.

Before beginning the HAP program, the purpose of the study was discussed with all participants and signed consents were procured. A copy of the consent form can be found in Appendix K. Since this population is vulnerable, the risk for potentially re-experiencing traumatic memories or eliciting difficult emotions through group participation, in the first session we discussed how this was a confidential, safe, non-judgmental space where they were invited to

set their own rules for the duration of the group. This was presented with the participants in the first session when they participated in the "group rules" activity.

Participants were advised that no names or identifying information will be used in disseminating the study findings. To ensure confidentiality, I assigned each participant with a pseudonym. Raw data has remained secure and has not been shared with anyone not directly involved in the research. Furthermore, I emphasized that pre-existing and ongoing shelter support and services were not connected in any way with the HAP program. Participants could leave the program at any point with no consequences related to the services and support Genevra House offers. As a lead facilitator of these two groups, I am a master of social work student with a degree in social work, experience in the program, and experience working with this population, competent to manage difficulties that may arise. Shelter support workers were also available to support participants if they needed further assistance. Additionally, a list of support services was also made available to the participants (see Appendix L).

Methods of Verification

Triangulation was used in this study to increase validity. The convergence between the quantitative and qualitative methods was used in this research to enhance our belief that the results are valid and reliable. Although each method has strengths and limitations, the effectiveness of triangulation rests on the idea that “the weaknesses in every single method will be compensated by the counter-balancing strength of another” (Jick, 1979, p. 607). Additionally, I transcribed all the data from the group interviews, immersing myself in the data. In efforts to reduce researcher bias, I reflected upon my own biases and invited the two other students to conduct the pre- and post-group interview sessions. Given the theoretical framework of this research, which views knowledge as socially constructed, to further validate the results, I sent

my preliminary analysis to my thesis supervisor for investigator triangulation, an additional step taken by researchers to involve several investigator's interpretations (Jick, 1979).

The three central themes suggest the delivery of mindfulness using arts-based methods proved beneficial for this population. The three main themes are: (1) benefits of learning mindfulness, which encompasses the sub-themes: increased awareness of thoughts, feelings, and emotions, effective coping strategies to reduce stress moving forward; (2) benefits of art-based experimental methods, which included the sub-themes: accessible and engaging ways of learning, relevant and meaningful, promoted self-discovery and self-expression; (3) benefits of strength-based group work, which included the sub-themes: developed positivity, normalization, provided a safe/supportive space, and cultivated feelings of connection and belonging. Together, themes (2) and (3) facilitated healing and empowerment (see Figure 1 below).

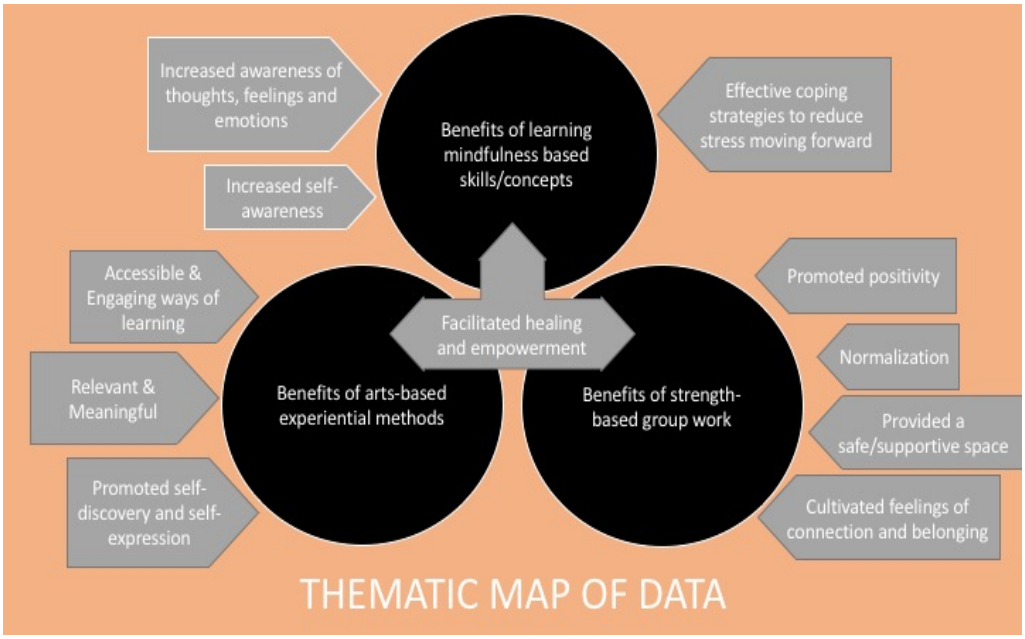

Figure 1. Thematic Map of Data

Summary

In this chapter, I described the study design, including the study's theoretical framework, the research strategy, and the data analysis techniques. The process of data collection and analysis was described. Researcher reflexivity was shared to share subjectivity, offer transparency, and potential biases to improve the quality of the research. Furthermore, I shared personal reflections and my own experience learning mindfulness practice. The study setting, target population, recruitment process, ethical considerations, and participants were described, and validation methods clarified to support findings. Finally, quantitative and qualitative results were outlined. In the next chapter, I will discuss the findings and their relevance.

Chapter Three
Data Analysis and Discussion

The qualitative research process described in the previous chapter summarized how the thematic analysis facilitated a comprehensive examination of the data from the participants' semi-structured pre- and post-group interviews. This chapter provides a summary and discussion of the findings from this mixed methods study designed to explore the benefits of a 12-week arts-based mindfulness group program with women survivors of IPV living in an emergency shelter called YWCA Genevra House in Sudbury, Ontario. I will discuss the quantitative and qualitative data analysis, defining the three main themes and the sub-themes that support their creation.

Quantitative Data Interpretation

Quantitative data from both Perceived Stress Scale (PSS) and the Five Facet Mindfulness Questionnaire (FFMQ) measures taken pre- and post-group showed no statistical significance. Some may question the usefulness of conducting quantitative analyses on such a small sample

size, however, on the PSS, the scores did show a decrease in the participants' perceived stress at the end of the 12-week program (even though this change was not statistically significant). Participants perceived stress decreased despite facing a whole new set of stressors having left abusive relationship and living in a community setting.

This being said, the reduced level of perceived stress experienced by participants at the end of the 12-week program (when the post-group test was administered) may also be related to the end of their shelter stay with the gain in community-based housing. The HAP is a 12-week program while the average stay at YWCA Genevra House is 12-weeks. Since most of the women started the 12-week program 2-4 weeks into their shelter stay, by the end of the program some had already found housing while most of the others participants were moving out within the next couple of weeks. In the group, most women expressed feeling relieved and excited for their new apartment. Due to the paralleling timelines of the HAP and the length of participants' shelter stay, the post-group results may have been impacted by participants' opportunity to move into the community.

Correspondingly, for the FFMQ scores, it could be argued that asking participants to complete the FFMQ, who lack an understanding of mindfulness concept pre-group may result in inaccurate responses about the understanding of mindfulness, whereas the post-group FFMQ may provide a more accurate measure of their mindfulness due to their acquired knowledge about mindfulness. For example, asking a non-mindful individual to complete a self-report instrument about their level of mindfulness may be challenging because they are not aware of their lack of mindfulness. Also, participants may not understand what a question about mindfulness is asking of them (Wong, Massar, Chee, & Lim, 2018). In this study, 10 of the 14 participants that completed the FFMQ had no prior exposure to mindfulness training, and this

lack of experience and knowledge may have influenced the reliability and validity of the FFMQ scores completed pre-group.

Although the FFMQ has been shown to have good internal consistency, and significant relationships in the predicted directions with a variety of constructs related to mindfulness (Baer et al. 2006), four of the facets (all but acting with awareness) were significantly correlated with meditation experience (Baer et al., 2011). Acting with awareness (observing facet) refers to attending or noticing internal and external experiences (e.g., thoughts, emotions, bodily sensations, sounds, smells). For example, the first observing item in the FFMQ asks: "I notice the smells and aromas of things." If participants are not aware of where their attention is directed at any given time, response to this item may be difficult. Some researchers argue that the relationship between the observing facet and meditation experience may be significant in samples of beginner meditators. As a result, recent research on mindfulness measures suggests that including the observing items when examining mindfulness scores in non-meditator adults' samples may result in biased/inaccurate scores because observing may mean something different to mediators and non-meditators (Williams et al., 2014).

Despite potential biases, the scores on the FFMQ showed an increase in participants' level of mindfulness at the end of the 12-week program although this increase was not statistically significant. Despite some challenges learning to meditate with guided meditations, participants increased their level of mindfulness by learning about the skills and concepts outside of this traditional practice. Participants were able to be more mindful and incorporate mindfulness in their daily lives by learning skills/concepts through Tai Chi, breathing exercises, arts-based methods, and group work. As noted above, as this research involved a small number of participants, the low statistical power of the analysis compromises the ability to make an

accurate judgment about the real effect of the intervention. If this study is replicated with a larger sample of participants, the analysis may yield different interpretations. Of relevance to my study, I will note that the quantitative results converge with, and lend support to, the qualitative findings.

Qualitative Data Interpretation and Discussion

Qualitative data analysis from pre- and post-group group interviews led to the construction of three main themes that describe the women's experiences of program participation. The themes are (1) Benefits of learning mindfulness-based skills/concepts, (2) Benefits of arts-based methods, (3) Benefits of strength-based group work. The following is a description of these three themes and the sub-themes within them that illustrate how women survivors of IPV experienced participation in the HAP.

Benefits of Learning Mindfulness Based Skills/Concepts

Previous researchers have documented that Mindfulness-Based Interventions (MBIs) have been shown to increase awareness of thoughts, feelings, and emotions (Holzel et al., 2011). The theme "benefits of learning mindfulness-based skills and concepts" encompasses how the women were able to learn mindfulness concepts and skills through engaging in games, activities, experiential mindfulness practices, and discussions each week. Categories that make up this theme include increased awareness of thoughts, feelings, and emotions, increased self-awareness, and improved capacity to cope with stressors.

Increased Awareness of Thoughts, Feelings, and Emotions

Research of MBIs with women survivors of IPV found that mindfulness interventions helped participants increase introspective awareness, cultivate emotion regulation, improve

capacity to manage negative emotions, and achieve emotional clarity (Hayes et al., 2004). First, participants' awareness was revealed as they described how they became increasingly aware of their thoughts throughout participation in the program. Several of the HAP activities invite participants to reflect on thoughts or feelings experienced during the activity. This practice of reflection encourages present moment awareness during activities and fosters increased awareness of thoughts and feelings. For example, Jane, from group two, revealed in her pre-group interview that she hoped HAP would help her address her catastrophic and ruminative thinking patterns. She stated:

> I'm hoping that [HAP] will help me to stop second-guessing myself and to stop expecting the worst in every situation. I am tired of this (deep breath) ugh, I'm not suicidal, but I mean it's always…I'm always expecting the worst case scenario in anything. I take those daily steps…but everything's just going to fall apart. I have a lot going on right now, and positivity is gone from my life.

Catastrophic and ruminative thinking about appointments with lawyers was a reoccurring theme with Jane. It became increasingly apparent over the weeks that she maintained a strong aversion to anything she could not control. She acknowledged this in group discussions and learned more about this from reflecting on the unpleasant experience of activities where she felt a loss of control. From her statement above, shared pre-group, it is evident that Jane had awareness and insights into her thinking patterns. Nonetheless, she desired to learn how to let go of these habitual thoughts or experiences. Catastrophic and ruminative thinking are habitual patterns of behavior that try and help individuals think their way out of unpleasant experiences. Jane's ability to let go, accept and move forward was apparent when she described her experience in HAP, during her post-group interview, she stated:

> My life was very chaotic before, and I know now that I can if I try to put the effort in I can make things go a little bit better. For example, in that activity called Bad Day Better, I learned how to take things that don't work out and try to make a better life no matter what I think. That stood out to me, in all the activities we did, they had this element of us doing something that wasn't working and trying to make it work. I think I'm very resilient and I think even though it feels awful I learned that it's okay when things fall apart and it's a guarantee for everyone living on earth that things will fall apart! …but to try and make the best of things.

In this example, Jane refers to an activity called Bad Day Better. In this activity, participants are given a series of three separate instructions. First, they are invited to fold a piece of paper of watercolor paper in half, and then they are invited to paint their interpretation of a bad day on the left side. Once that is complete they are invited to fold the paper in two so that the painted side is transferred onto the blank side of the sheet. In the next instruction, participants are invited to paint their interpretations of a good day over the top of the imprint of the bad day now reflected onto the right side. Finally, when that is complete, the participants are invited to fold the paper one last time to imprint the better day on top of the bad day, ultimately improving both days. The purpose of this activity is to support participants' understanding that they can make a bad day better. We have the ability to make our bad days better depending on what we focus on, how grateful we are, and so on. Some group members have shared the ways in which they don't need to make one bad day into one bad week. This activity allowed us to normalize bad bays as part of life while helping us express the difficult feelings in our bad days in healthy and helpful ways instead of letting these emotions control most of our time (Coholic, 2019) (see illustration below).

Illustration 1
Group Two's "Bad Day Better"

Many participants enjoyed the invitation of the Bad Day Better activity to relinquish control. When participants reflected on their experiences in the program, as expressed earlier by Jane, three other group members also expressed how they learned how to make their bad days better despite feelings of frustration when they were asked to fold the page in half after creating their paintings, not once, but twice. Further, the experiences of attachment to the painting provided the opportunity for us as a group to engage in a dialogue exploring the mindfulness concepts of non-attachment and letting go. Both of these concepts allow one to experience the present moment. When asked about her experience learning mindfulness in her post-group interview, Haven, one participant from group two, expressed how helpful it was to learn to be in

the present moment. She stated: “Understand mindfulness, understanding your thoughts and emotions, and where your head is at I find it’s been helpful. It made me realize that I’m dwelling on things I shouldn’t be dwelling on and that I should just be moving forward and focusing on what’s good.”

In this example, Haven articulated that her experience in the program helped her recognize that her mind was dwelling on the past instead of being in the present. Haven acknowledged that learning to be in the present moment offered her relief from ruminative thinking, by providing her opportunity to focus on what is happening now. In another example of increased awareness of thoughts, Kimberly, a participant from group one, had some unique challenges living in the shelter and her transitional plan. She consistently expressed a lot of anger and frustrations regarding the system, other residents, and staff. Despite these challenges, she shared some valuable experiences of her time in HAP, including the her new found understanding of the underlying reasons for her anger and feelings of frustration. Through the repeated opportunity for self-expression, self-exploration, and group discussions, she developed a deeper understanding of her anger. Kimberly realized that it was based on the emotional pain she obtained from past abuse. With this understanding, she experienced a shift in her thinking, which resulted in mediated responses to occurrences previously triggered by anger, which in turn helped her advocate for herself. In this example, Kimberly shared: “HAP helped me deal with my stress but especially with the thoughts and behaviors associated with my anger and how to express [anger] in productive ways…ways I can use to advocate for myself... also I learned it’s okay to feel that way.”

In this example, Kimberly’s increased ability to understand her thoughts and feelings helped her regulate the associated behaviors. Acceptance of emotions was also evident as her

feeling angry was met with less judgement. As indicated earlier, awareness, emotion regulation, and acceptance are common outcomes of participation in an MBI. Researchers have found that even brief exposure to mindfulness practice may result in increased awareness and attention, and reductions in anxiety and judgment (Kabat-Zinn, 2003). Increased awareness of judgmental thoughts of women both judging themselves and others was another benefit of learning mindfulness-based skills/concepts. Kabat-Zinn, (2003). considered non-judging an attitudinal foundation of mindfulness practice; he suggested we continuously generate judgements about our experience. Generally, these judgments, either good or bad, dominate the focus of our attention. Awareness of these judgments without trying to change them is the first step toward cultivating non-judgmental awareness.

Non-judgment was introduced in the first HAP session, and frequent reminders of this critical concept were offered repeatedly throughout the 12 weeks. Non-judgment was perhaps one of the most difficult challenges. All women participants had a lot of negative self-talk when they began the program. Because of this, awareness of a lack of judgements from the facilitators became evident to achieve this goal, especially when it came time to share the art creations. As facilitators, instead of praising what is considered visually striking, we made a conscious effort to question their experience creating the art instead of appraising the final product, for example, showing genuine curiosity when it came to color, style or design.

It's important to note that all participants experienced varied types of violence (physical, sexual, emotional, psychological, and controlling behaviors). The journey through and out of intimate partner violence (IPV) is often marked by an initial loss of identity followed by an identity reconstruction through a process of change aimed at rebuilding self-esteem, mental well-being, self-efficacy, and ultimately self-identity (Matheson et al., 2015). Considering this

process, all group members at the beginning of the program indicated issues with low self-worth, low self-esteem, and/or loss of identity from IPV.

These issues arose through self-disclosure and group discussions. Most self-judgement was illuminated when Lilian, Janet, Donna, Susan, Kimberly, Jane, Jessica, and Haven, participants from group one and two initially hesitated before participating in group. When invited to start an art-activity, these women stated how their hesitation or nonparticipation at the beginning of the program was related to feeling like they had no artistic abilities. Beyond the self-judgment related to creating art, negative self-talk was continuously present throughout the 12-week program.

The judgment of others was also apparent, particularly, the judgment of other women's mothering practices in the shelter. Nevertheless, judgmental comments of other women in the group provided us the opportunity to have in-depth conversations about judgment. For example, if one participant expressed judgment towards other women's actions or behaviors, as facilitators we would often revert to how we are all different yet still connected. For example, many women cope differently with stress, trauma, and abuse. However, this diversity isn't wrong; instead, it shows us how we all have different strengths. Introducing compassion in its place of judgment throughout the program allowed some participants to realize how judging themselves or others was preventing them from connecting to themselves and connecting to others.

For instance, in the following excerpt, Donna described how the non-judgmental environment of HAP empowered her to let go of some of her self-judgment while expressing herself without the fear judgment. She stated: "Well, at first like I told Stephanie, I don't do art, I don't do this and that, but in the group, you're thinking to yourself…other people are doing

it…and there was no judgement on your work, and that was something I learned. Nobody was ever judging anybody in here."

During group discussions, individuals' coping mechanisms were revealed, however group members recounted how increased awareness from program participation led to the acceptance of negatively perceived emotions. For example, in the next quote, Haven, a participant from group two, described bottling her feelings up to avoid them and attributed her participation in the program to their alleviation. She stated:

> I shred a lot of tears in this room, and I'm not ashamed to shred my tears or share my feelings because bottling them up does not prove anything and it doesn't benefit us in any way possible…[HAP] made me more mindful of how I'm feeling and being more aware of myself instead of just going on day to day…I'm doing things to make every day better.

In this example, Haven articulated that her experience in the program helped her recognize habitual patterns of suppressing emotions and acknowledged that talking about them during group discussion offered her relief from the burden of stress. Haven also claimed that she no longer felt shame when shedding tears in the presence of others because that's one way in which you can feel and express emotions instead of bottling them up. Accompanying this developing awareness, participants conveyed an increased ability to create a space between feeling an emotion and reacting to it. This was apparent when Vanessa described how HAP helped her develop the ability to respond with consciousness and clarity, instead of automatically reacting in a systematic or conditioned way. This increased awareness enabled her to identify and thus react more effectively to feelings, instead of immediately reacting to them, which often resulted in the emotions "running my life." Vanessa acknowledged:

> [HAP] helped me bring me to the goal I had in the beginning. Which was to create a gap between feeling and having to respond to it so I can act instead of reacting… I mean I'm not perfect at it yet, but [HAP] has helped me move towards that goal.

This quote demonstrates how Vanessa became increasingly aware and was able to regulate her emotions by recognizing them. One activity that embodied reclaiming feelings and emotions related to power, control and resiliency was Emotion Collage. Emotion Collage is an activity where participants are encouraged to create a collage depicting the feelings they had after reflecting on a particular dream. The group members are encouraged to sit with the emotion of the dream (not how they feel when they are awake and thinking about the dream but how they felt in the dream). Participants are then invited to let the feelings fill them. Next they are asked to look through magazines and cut out pictures or words that catch their attention without thinking too much about the process. The participants are advised not to read the articles in the magazines, because this engages cognitive processes as opposed to staying with and experiencing a feeling (Coholic, 2019) (see illustration 2 below).

Illustration 2
Group One's "Emotion Collages"

During this activity, participants were able to learn more about their feelings and emotions. Some cut out words included: now, redefined, refuelling, true, real, feel, shine, brave, powerful, essential, bold, more, possibilities. Some cut out quotes include: where am I? where are you going? beaten path means you're on the right track, fell in love, take it slow, your voice your choice, what women don't say, expectations vs reality, lash out, mad as hell, seeing red, the power of women's rage, history will judge her on her response. Finally, visual cut outs included: Time magazine cover "Her Lasting Impact," of Dr. Christine Blasey Ford (portrait illustrated by the words and phrases from her testimony during the Senate hearings on the Supreme Court nomination of Judge Brett Kavanaugh), Tracee Ellis Ross (activist, actress, comedian, director, television host), groups of women running a marathon, nature, adventure, food, music, and fashion. These words, quotes, and images are listed to better portray the emotions and feelings participants wanted their collages to embody. After completing this activity, participants were asked to discuss their collages with the group. Rich and powerful group discussions followed as women shared the reasons why they chose certain pieces. Staying with and experiencing a feeling while browsing a magazine allowed participants to feel and express themselves, in a creative and non-threatening way. This activity also allowed participants to gain awareness of conscious and unconscious feelings and emotions while reflecting on a dream.

Increased Self-Awareness

Increased awareness of thoughts, feelings, emotions led to an overall increased self-awareness. Learning mindfulness-based skills and concepts through arts-based methods helped women learn more about themselves by exploring their thoughts, feelings, and emotions in a group which provided a safe, non-judgmental space. This revelation is apparent in the following

excerpt when Janet, a participant from group one, described her experience in the program during her post-group interview. She declared: "I met some nice people here, I was there to listen, and I know that about myself. I'm a good listener, but here I learned more about myself. Things I thought I was…I was so wrong." Hearing the experiences of other group members also helped participants learn more about themselves and build new capacities as a result of learning mindfulness concepts and participating in experiential practice. By learning more about oneself, one can start to dismantle negative self-judgment.

An art-based activity that many participants described as generating increased self-awareness was Me as a Tree. Me as a Tree, is a non-threatening self-exploration used to increase self-awareness and build group cohesion as participants are invited to draw themselves as a tree. Once complete, this drawing is shared with the other group members inviting non-judgmental inquiry into their creative pieces. The purpose of this activity is to encourage participants to engage in a fun, non-threatening self-inquiry, and to share a little about themselves with the group. The Me as a Tree activity is introduced early in the program, in the third session, which helps build group cohesion through self-disclosure and the revelation of group members' commonalities and differences (Coholic, 2019) (see illustration 1 below).

Illustration 3

Group One's "Me as a Tree" self-portraits

Illustration X demonstrates the groups' diversity which is visible in the uniqueness of their Me as a Tree self-portrait. It also shows how participants were able to self-reflect and provide a visual representation of how they perceive themselves. Each participant shared their drawing along with personal interpretations for group discussion. The dialogue that followed this activity fostered increased self-awareness and group cohesion. Participants described how attributes of their trees were self-reflective. For instance, in five examples, the roots of the trees are shown. This representation was symbolic of the participants' personal and familial values. Participants mentioned the importance of family for well-being, growth and stability. While

stating this importance, some women mentioned the desire to solidify some of the bonds in their respective families. Roots of trees also symbolized participants feeling grounded during this activity.

Another participant who had drawn herself as a willow tree mentioned the symbolism rooted in spirituality and cultural traditions. Vanessa stated how she felt she shared valuable traits with the willow tree, one being its flexibility and ability to bend without snapping. For her this was a powerful metaphor for her seeking a spiritual path. The symbolic message of the willow tree is to adjust with life, rather than fighting it, surrendering to the process. Just like a willow tree Vanessa's ability to adapt, let go and surrender at this point in her life allowed her to not only survive but also thrive in some of her most challenging conditions. Another great symbolic meaning of the willow tree is that even through great loss we have the ability to grow and there is potential for something new. Cultivating self-awareness by learning about mindfulness in these ways supported participants' understanding concerning the impacts of abuse on themselves, their values, patterns of behavior, and responses to emotional experiences. Participants were empowered by their heightened self-awareness to recognize and develop their strengths as well as identify challenging or traumatic experiences as firsthand knowledge that has cultivated their compassion, resilience, and growth.

Topics of discussion ranged from present moment awareness, the power of now, self-care, self-determination, love, anger, courage, resiliency, and choosing emotional responses. Ultimately, participation in such activities helped women reclaim their power by better understanding their emotions, consequently, developing more capacities to determine whether to accept or respond to feelings. This finding is consistent with the mindfulness literature that exemplifies self-regulation as a standard outcome of participating in an MBI (Creswell &

Lindsay, 2014). Participants' experiences in the program support the idea that awareness of thoughts, feelings, and emotions as a result of learning mindfulness concepts and skills can help empower individuals by providing them an opportunity to connect with themselves.

The HAP offers a unique approach to learning mindfulness concepts, as it is not delivered with a required commitment to developing a formal mindfulness practice. Instead, concepts are taught more informally through arts-based methods in combination with some brief formalized practice. While it is hoped that participants will practice and apply what they are learning outside of the group experience, this approach is used to make the program more accessible to vulnerable populations such as women survivors, populations that may not otherwise engage in mindfulness. As the weeks progressed, it became apparent that the women in each group were more enthusiastic about attending as more participants were arriving on time for the group. Additionally, participants started to greet each other with more enthusiasm and positivity into this space. Despite living in such proximity, woman welcomed one another as if they haven't seen each other since the previous session. Participants were genuinely excited about sharing in the group and participating in new art activities.

Although they appreciated breathing exercises and Tai Chi, they did not express the same level of enthusiasm for guided meditations. The was reflected in the post-group interviews where little acknowledgment was attributed to the meditations throughout the program. The invitation to join a positive, safe, non-judgmental space where women are welcomed to explore and discuss thoughts and feelings was entirely new for most, if not all group members, especially in this setting. Initially, most women observed the processes rather than joining in. However, this rapidly changed as they became more comfortable to share. Facilitating and re-directing group discussions so that every woman had an opportunity to share in our two-hour time frame was our

greatest challenge. The two-hour program session, once a week appeared insufficient as women began to articulate their desire for a minimum of two sessions per week to allow for lengthier discussions.

Effective Coping Strategies to Reduce Stress Moving Forward

Researchers have found that participation in MBIs has mitigated the adverse effects of stress (Creswell & Lindsay, 2014). The category of effective responses to stressors considers participants' use of helpful coping strategies to respond to the negative impact of stressors. There are multiple examples where women conveyed their improved capacities to respond to stressors. In this first example, Tracy, a participant from group one, stated that being in the group providing her with the opportunity to feel grounded. During her post-group interview, she declared:

> In this circumstance, you have a lot of agencies in your life, whether that is court or child protection services or police. I've always had this mindset like there are way too many chefs boiling the soup… it's just hard to stay grounded, and this program has enabled me to find a place every week to sit down and feel grounded and bond with women who have had shared experiences and the real concrete things that come out of that.

In this example, Tracy indicates feeling overwhelmed by the numerous agencies in her life which effected her ability to feel grounded. Feeling grounded is defined as feeling balanced and strongly connected to yourself and your environment (Williams, & Poijula, 2016). Moreover, grounding techniques have been proven to be effective in overcoming traumatic stress symptoms. Trauma survivors often describe a disconnection from and lack of safety within their bodies. Unpredictable flashbacks and dissociative episodes deepen the perception that the body is detached from the self and not a place they want to call home (Van der Kolk, 2006).

Consequently, part of developing new coping strategies to reduce stress moving forward involves assisting women in connecting with and making peace with their bodies. Feeling grounded fosters this connection, reduces fears and worries while increasing focus and attention in trauma survivors because they can feel safe and capable to do so (Williams, & Poijula, 2016).

In another example, Vanessa indicates how even just attending group helped her reduce stress. She stated: “Yes [HAP] was the thing I looked forward to every week; it was that thing that kept me going. That one week I had to miss, that was hard. It's over, and I know I'll miss it; the program was valuable, you know?" In another example, Jane and Julie described their experiences, gaining emotional clarity engaging in art activities in the group as reducing their experience of stress. They submitted how their learning and experiences within the group helped them better understand and organize their thoughts, feelings, and emotions fueling stress; they expressed:

> [HAP] helped to make sense of my emotions, which helped reduce my stress because I could understand what I was feeling. After dealing with all my emotions...if they [stressors] are still not working themselves out…I have these emotions that I can chronologically put back together – Jane
>
> [HAP] helped me reduce my stress because it helped me organize my thoughts and emotions when they were all over the place – Julie

Interestingly, making sense of stressful thoughts, emotions, and feelings and how they impacted participants developed through activities that explored the underlying messages and relevance of dreams. In the Paint/Draw a Dream activity, group participants recalled a feeling they had during a past dream and then drew or painted this feeling/dream. This activity encourages a connection to be made between feelings and dreams. The participants come to

realize that the feelings they experienced during a dream may be different from the feelings one has after the dream has occurred. The purpose of this activity is to increase self-awareness and promote self-expression through the exploration of dreams (Coholic, 2019) (see illustration 4 below).

Illustration 4

Group One's "Paint a Dream"

This activity was challenging for some women because many experience difficulty recalling their dreams or memories because of the stress from traumatic events creating insomnia or sleep-related problems. Therefore, as an alternative, we invited them to create a dream they have for their future. However, many participants asked if they could paint/draw nightmares they've had in the past. Specifically, nightmares that have interrupted their sleep or caused them significant distress. Accepting this modification to Paint/Draw a dream allowed a few participants (Tracy, Vanessa, Kimberly, and Haven) in both groups to safely share some of the

traumatic memories they've experienced in the past that they still experience to this day through their dreams.

In the group, this provided us with an opportunity to discuss the relevance of dreams and the feelings associated. Many women believed that all dreams, good or bad, were spiritual messages trying to enlighten or create a path for healing. Also, fear and anxiety were the most commonly expressed emotions in dreams, followed by anger and sadness. Participants revealed how exploring their dreams and nightmares allowed them to discover and reflect on their real, authentic feelings; authentic feelings that may have been suppressed during the day and are being expressed in dreams where defenses are down. Exploring the feelings expressed in these dreams/nightmares helped participants deal openly with feelings of depression, anxiety, fear, and anger. For example, after Vanessa shared her painting of one of her recent nightmares, she realized how much control the feelings of fear, confusion, and stress about her ex-partner had impacted her life, including her quality of sleep. She then proceeded to grab another piece of blank paper and asked if she could paint the feeling she had right now. As we continued to invite the other women to share their dream, Vanessa proceeded to create another painting. After all group members were allowed to share, she shared this new dream she had for herself (see illustration 5 below).

Illustration 5
Vanessa's "Paint a Dream" part two.

This new dream conveyed was a powerful message for Vanessa and other group members. While sharing this new dream, Vanessa was calm and at peace, and she expressed how this activity made her realize she had power over her thoughts and how she chose to respond to the stress, fear and confusion she experienced, even in her dreams. Vanessa discovered stress relief painting and expressing her dreams, so much so she asked to express another dream before we moved on to the next activity. Many other group members had similar experiences. In another example, Donna described her experience of reducing stress by being provided with an opportunity to express it safely. She declared:

> I think [HAP] did help with recent stressors because we painted it, we expressed it. Like all the stuff I went through with my brother I painted it all out and I got it out right? For example, that one time [Janet] and I noticed we were both missing our dogs through the artwork…most of the time I was painting or drawing my dogs and getting it all out.

In both groups, freedom of emotional expression allowed participants to be themselves openly and promoted an environment where all group members can be comfortable to share their

stories, without judgment. Overall participants acknowledged the benefits of their increased awareness of thoughts, feelings, and emotions, and new coping strategies to reduce stress moving forward as a direct result of their engagement in the program learning mindfulness.

Benefits of Arts-Based Experiential Methods

Art therapies are increasingly useful as therapeutic and transformational tools because they are accessible ways to express yourself without language. The use of arts-based experiential methods also suggests that these methods can improve psychological and physical well-being by relieving stress, sparking creativity, boosting self-esteem, providing a sense of accomplishment, increasing brain plasticity, and increasing empathy and resiliency (Leckey, 2011). The theme "benefits of arts-based experiential methods" encompasses how the use of arts-based methods supported the women's experiences of the HAP. The use of arts-based methods helped participants learn about mindfulness concepts/skills more easily because these methods were accessible and engaging by providing providing a hands-on, creative way of learning. These methods also promoted self-discovery and self-expression in participants in a non-threatening and enjoyable way.

For instance, exploring one's thoughts, feelings and emotions through art can be more feasible for some participants. In this first example, one participant demonstrates how she was able to express and communicate more effectively through art. In her post-group interview, Donna stated: "I learned how to express myself through art, I learned how to talk more, because I'm not very good with that." Accordingly, other participants described how the art activities made learning about mindfulness more enjoyable, and they related how much they looked forward to attending group emphasizing the creative and playful components of the art activities.

The Doodle Draw activity is the first arts-based activity introduced in the HAP, and as

such, provides an effective foundation as it allows participants to become familiar with the program's approach. The purpose of the Doodle Draw activity is to help the participants feel comfortable with the creative process. Group members are encouraged to doodle on a piece of paper for a short time. Next, participants are invited to modify their doodle to create a picture (Coholic, 2019). Initially, the participants were a little confused by the invitation to doodle, but even those who didn't do the activity exactly as prescribed happily shared how they felt, and what they thought, before, during, and after the activity. This warm-up art activity invites creativity and different perspectives and demonstrates from the start that the quality of artistic creation is not relevant. This first activity also allows for safe, non-threatening sharing as participants often speak about the challenge of transforming their doodle into a picture. In one example, a participant from group two described how this activity helped her express herself freely without limitations. Jane stated: "Doodle draw was very helpful to me. It's practicing letting go and letting your pen go wherever it wants."

Illustration 6
Group Two "Doodle Draw"

Making Mindfulness Concepts/Skills Accessible and Engaging

As indicated earlier, HAP is a new approach to learning mindfulness that is fun and engaging; adjectives not often used to describe mainstream MBIs. In one example, Tracy described the arts-based methods as playful and suggested that learning this way, with joy and positivity, was refreshing in a shelter environment, where community living can be stressful and rules and regulations restrictive: "the playful component of art activities made it more livable…more tolerable to be here while you're still trying to plan and re-build your life."

The lack of funding for programming in women's shelter makes it difficult to offer the residents playful activities where they can learn meaningful concepts while they enjoy themselves. In another example, Donna acknowledged how the art helped her learn about mindfulness concepts: "in the one activity where you had to connect your favorite person, color, and food and draw an image interconnecting all of that, that was enlightening." In this example, Donna is referring to an activity called Create a Dream where participants are instructed to draw a large circle on their paper and then to draw a triangle inside the circle, where all the vertices extend to touch the circle. In the three moon shapes created, the participants are invited to share their favorite color, their favorite food, and a favorite/special person in their life. Inside the triangle, participants are invited to draw a dream which includes their favorite color, food, and person (Coholic, 2019).

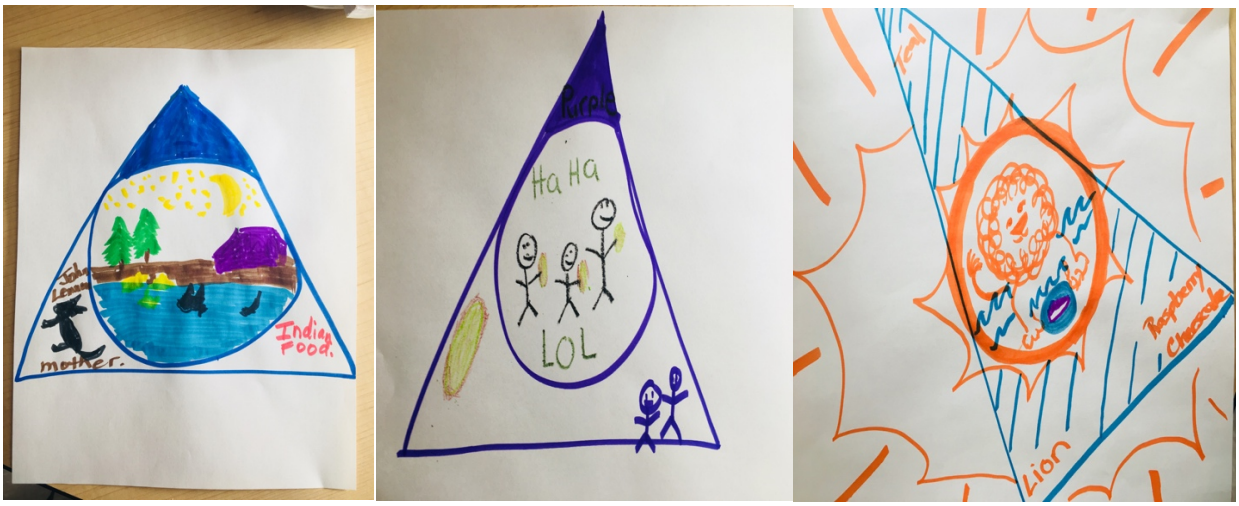

Illustration 7
Group One “Create a Dream”

Interconnecting all of their favorite things helped participants create a dream for themselves and who they would like to share that dream with. Rich discussions with group members followed this activity. As a group, we discussed how when we become increasingly aware internally, we learn to recognize how we place ourselves at the center of things such as our world, our future, our well-being, and our security. However, the instruction of the last moon shape in Create a Dream, helped us leave behind our self-interested focus and become more other-focused ultimately discussing the benefits of becoming more compassionate and interconnected to other people by recognizing the joy they bring to our dream.

Another way learning mindfulness concepts/skills became more accessible and engaging was by providing a creative outlet to the women through the art. Many participants supported the desire to learn how to heal from abuse and trauma by learning through alternative and creative methods. In the following example, a participant mentioned how throughout her journey to healing from abuse, which began in her early childhood, agencies in her life would refer her to talk therapies while no creative outlet was made available. She stated:

> When I was younger, I ended up in care. When that happened, there was no source or no outlet for me to cope… I remember I asked a worker, I think I was like 11 or 12…to have a creative outlet, be that music, dance or art, that's just who I am, and I remember it being imposed on me to go to any of these talk therapies… I needed art to help me, but that was never available. It was always come out to a different agency, a different talk therapy, never offering anything to help me connect to myself. I'm really thankful for the HAP because I was able to do that for myself, HAP was the creative outlet that helped me tap into myself, it's not like CBT or DBT or any normal talk therapy because here you're doing it, it's hands-on, it's grounding, it's helpful and it's expressive and you get to work out the stuff that you need to work out. Now my daughter has the same needs, and I just enrolled her in HAP at Laurentian University for the next groups because I know it's valuable.

Despite not having the opportunity to heal through a creative outlet as a young child, Tracy was able to find that outlet in the HAP while residing at YWCA Genevra House, 20 years later. After completing the program, Tracy asked about the youth groups and how she could refer her 12-year-old daughter. The information was provided to Tracy, and her daughter enrolled in the HAP at Laurentian University for the following 2019 winter groups. In another example, Donna stated: "it was new to me to create and express our emotions through art, and I found it very therapeutic, and I've only done some creativity through poetry and photography but never this." Beyond creativity, all participants acknowledged the use of arts-based methods for learning mindfulness as essential as it made all concepts more understandable as art can ground and connect you while allowing you to express and practice mindfulness concepts.

Promoted Self-Discovery and Reconstruction of Self

Arts-based methods are holistic and strengths-based, and as such, can be spiritual, emotional, and a useful creative outlet to promote self-discovery and to reconstruct the self. According to the literature, the dissipation of a women's identity does not signify a loss of self (Walker, 2009). However, in abusive relationships, a women's identity is construed and developed through social interrelationships with others, especially those with whom she is emotionally attached (Allen-Collinson, 2011; Baly, 2010; Miller, 2007). Therefore, when a woman who has experienced IPV, decides to terminate the abusive relationship, the judgment a woman attributes to her resolutions needs to be acknowledged. These resolutions assist in the reconstruction of her identity and in the negotiation of coping strategies to gain well-being (Baly, 2010; Zakar & Kraemer, 2012).

Interestingly, in group, some participants shared how the art helped them re-discover themselves and reconstruct certain aspects of their identity. In one example, a participant acknowledged her challenges navigating negative self-judgment and feelings of hopelessness post IPV. She articulated her appreciation of the program and described why she believed it would be feasible for all women who have difficulty with self-discovery, identity, and low self-worth post IPV.

Susan stated:

> Well, I'm not good at art, but drawing or painting helped me express what I'm feeling and discover what I like. It also gave me motivation, especially the envelopes [warm fuzzies] where we leave positives notes for each other. Before I always used to tell myself I'm not a good person, I am miserable, I am bad, I am all these negative things, but whenever I read those messages, I feel good about myself. Because I have a hard time

> expressing my feelings I like those activities, the art-based thing helped me because through the art I get to chose what I want to add or what I want to be.

The purpose of Warm Fuzzies is to nurture positive feelings between group participants to create a better sense of self-esteem and to develop self-compassion. Each group member decorates a small white envelope with their name on it. Using their decorated clothespins, the envelopes are hung on a strung for the duration of the group. Participants are encouraged to write a "warm fuzzy" (a compliment, praise, something positive) about each group member and themselves, and then place these messages in the envelopes. The group can discuss how reading positive things, and affirmations about themselves make them feel as well as how creating something positive for a fellow group member feels (Coholic, 2019).

It's important to note that some participants demonstrated awareness of their strengths and challenges related to their experiences of IPV. For example, both Marilyn and Janet expressed an understanding of themselves through their positive qualities. In the pre-group interview Marilyn recognized that, though she "lost [herself]" while enduring IPV, she desires to feel positive and confident about herself again, reclaiming her caring and loving qualities as strengths. She stated:

> I'm usually a strong person, but this [IPV] episode with my husband was hard on me. So I just wanted to reassure myself again of who I am. Because I lost that, you know? In a relationship, you tend to go to your husband's way of doing things. Now it's my turn to be positive about myself again and to have the confidence I used to have...I want to reassure myself of who I am, I liked who I was before.

Janet, too understood herself as someone concerned with others, in her case as a community-builder. She recounted with pride several examples of her strong community

involvement, stating that "all children I serviced [in the community] were my children." Janet understood the importance of this aspect of her identity, even while recognizing that her ex-husband did not understand this part of herself. She became emotional as she explained how she enjoyed being helpful by working and volunteering, aspects of herself that her partner didn't particularly support because she was giving to people other than him. As Janet explained: "Children heal me…I try and help people here too [women and children in the shelter] by driving them to appointments or wherever they want to go… I try and help them." Marilyn and Janet's insights were that giving to others was a way to give back to themselves. However, Marilyn, Janet, and Susan's personal strengths were also challenges in their intimate relationships where they claimed to lose some of the pride associated with their strengths.

Moreover, by recognizing the effects of intimate partner violence, all participants demonstrated a strong recognition of how their sense of self was eroded throughout their experiences of IPV, and how they have been physically, emotionally, and psychologically affected by the abuse inflicted on them by their intimate partners. In the following example, Lilian described how her experience revolved around meeting other people's needs, leaving little room to discover or love herself: "We always cater to everybody. As women, that's what we learn to do. But now we're at the point where we must love ourselves. So I'm learning around here, and here [shelter] can be the healing point." In another example, Janet also disclosed her stressful experiences of caring for everyone else in her family. She stated:

> I had to take care of my husband, take care of my father, take care of my mother (sigh). That was stressful, but I was able to manage. I did, I still have my marbles. I wonder how come? (laughter). [Most recently] picking up after a son, and also picking up after his

> new girlfriend…it got to me, and one day I just laid still on the couch, and my son said, 'mom is anything wrong?' I said, yes. I don't feel at home anymore.

While caring for a loved one can be very rewarding, it also involves many stressors. In Janet's case, she sought shelter because of financial abuse at the hands of her son. Despite this, exhaustion, lack of support and isolation, Janet shared her joy of being a mother, and the love she has for her son. Away from the abuse, Janet disclosed her feelings of self-blame and how she continues to struggle to live up to the unrealistic social expectations. The expectations to always be happy and strong are also imposed on women. In her experiences with IPV, Marilyn shares how she also burned out. She stated: "I was always the one who was in charge of everything, I'm used to being on the back burner, making sure everyone else is okay, my kids, my husband, the house… I'm a very giving person… but after all these years...it's my turn to take care of myself". In this example, Marilyn is aware of some of her positives attributes, caring and strong. However, she learned how people could take advantage of these strengths when one has no boundaries.

Each of these women demonstrated a clear awareness of the multiple ways that IPV negatively affected them. They understood how the control their partners exerted over them impacted their behavior, and ultimately their sense of self. More positively, the art and experiential nature of the warm fuzzy activity provided us with the opportunity to facilitate these types of discussions in a group. Discussions where participants were able to benefit by realizing how their past relationships limited their self-discovery and contributed to their negative sense of self. Interestingly, with warm fuzzies, participants could re-build aspects of themselves through positively expressing oneself while receiving more accurate messages from other women that affirmed the make up of who they are; the self they identified with separate from abuse. In this

activity, participants were guided through feelings of self-kindness. For example, as facilitators, we'd ask participants 'What are some things you like about yourself?', 'What do you appreciate about yourself?' 'What are some of your strengths?' At the same time, these type of questions were posed to participants about other group members. Overall, this art-based activity was effective in helping survivors view themselves more realistically while countering negative self-judgments.

By viewing ourselves more realistically, we can discover ourselves more freely and re-build or reclaim aspects of our identity, which are often lost in abusive relationships. Each week, participants would either add to other participants' envelopes or take the time to read the messages inside their own. The messages written by women in this activity helped survivors move from self-judgment to self-acceptance. Following Susan's experiences of warm fuzzies, here are excerpts from Janet and Donna:

> I found it challenging to have this envelope… I've never been told I was loved; I was never told that I did anything right. I was an abused child, and coming into this program, the other women all told me what I was. By the little notes, I have in my envelope… it lifted me so much. To know myself, to know who I am. The love that poured towards me, so positive and strong, because when you're not loved, and you're told you're nothing from a young child when you're told how good you are or what you are. When you see what others see in you. They can't all be liars; you know? this activity was beautiful. – Janet

> That was positive. Especially considering you're already coming in here with problems, you're coming from a position of abuse, so you don't have much positive talk about yourself so yeah [these envelopes] have been helpful – Donna

In these examples, Janet and Donna acknowledged that this activity helped them reclaim positive aspects of themselves. Especially coming from abusive situations where survivors often blame themselves, positive self-talk, praise, compliments, or positive attributes are often not experienced in this way. In another example, one participant shared a similar experience by acknowledging the importance of providing opportunities to reduce the power differential between workers and clients within vulnerable sectors. Tracy stated:

> Since my adolescence I've fallen into a lot of cracks, whether that'd be in group homes or shelters, I've always been a runaway, trying to find that safe place because I've come through abuse, sexual assault, and addictions. There was a lot to overcome and if you think about being in those institutions…and trying to feel loved in those institutions…I had to mitigate that. If I think of any professional working within those systems, it's almost as if you're legislated out of the capacity to express love to an individual because they're a client… so the warm fuzzies in this group…it was just opportunity.

In this activity, facilitators joined the women in creating envelopes and sharing positive messages. As Tracy acknowledged, this was also an opportunity for us as facilitators/social workers to build trusting and helping relationships with the women by offering compassion while being authentic and open with participants in our participation throughout the program. The use of art is especially helpful when when working with marginalized populations because through art, participants can express experiences that are too difficult to put into words.

Interestingly, the non-verbal communication component of the arts-based methods also benefitted Janet, a participant who didn't always want to vocalize her journey. Not because of traumatic memories but because of her feelings of guilt and shame about her personal growth. In her post-group interview, she stated:

> I came in the shelter broken. After a week here, I felt free. I don't have to face [abusive individuals] anymore. I don't have to take anything from them, and I feel so good here [in HAP]. But I feel kind of guilty about that because there are a lot more women suffering. Suffering deeper than I ever did. Sometimes I don't really want to talk because now I'm happy…I just got my little apartment. I have my dog; I made some friends!

In this example, Janet indicated that she didn't always want to verbalize her positive emotions, but through the art, she could still participate and express her joy. In a group, Janet was also aware that not all participants had found housing. Wanting to express her joy and excitement but afraid it might irritate other women. Janet could express these feelings through her art and simply decide not to share when we invited her to.

Further, more self-expression fostered more self-awareness in participants. With this awareness, women were able to deal with feelings in a more direct and effective way. An art-based activity that many women described as generating increased awareness of feelings and emotions was Feeling Inventory. For this activity, participants are invited to think of all the different feelings they've experienced during the day. Then, these feelings are written down on a piece of paper. On another piece of paper, participants divide their pages into the feelings they had throughout the day depicting by size how much of the day they felt each feeling.

The participants can be as creative as they want. In the past, participants have represented each feeling in the shape of large, medium, and small bubbles. Whatever way the feeling is

represented, each feeling should be identified by symbols, words or colors. Finally, group members are asked to share their Feelings Inventory with the group. The purpose of this activity is to encourage participants to engage in a creative, non-threatening self-inquiry and self-expression of the feelings they felt during the day, and to share those feelings with the group. The Feelings Inventory is introduced halfway through the program, usually by the sixth session (Coholic, 2019).

Illustration 8
Group One's "Feelings Inventory" self-portraits

Illustration X demonstrates the groups' diversity which is visible in the uniqueness of their artistic Feelings Inventory self-portraiture. It also shows how participants were able to self-reflect and provide an abstract, therefore non-threatening, visual representation of all the feelings

they felt that day. Each participant shared their drawing along with personal interpretations for group discussion and inquiry. The dialogue that followed this activity fostered increased self-awareness and self-reflection. Participants described how this activity helped them ground themselves at that moment and reflect on all the feelings and emotions they've experienced most recently. This is apparent in the following excerpts:

> I also enjoyed [Feelings Inventory] because we just had to talk about our immediate emotions and it just helps you touch base with how you're feeling at that particular time, and I enjoyed that aspect of it - Donna

> Yeah, you have to think about things…for me it was subtler things like sometimes things click; differently, I already had an understanding of them but some of the pieces of me... especially, feelings inventory, when you have to stop and think about your emotions in group… it makes it easier to stop and think about it in your daily life. I learned more coping mechanisms rather than something about myself, but I feel like it was kind of the same thing and now I know myself better in those situations. - Vanessa

As emotions arise, participants could use art activities such as Feelings Inventory outside of the group to deal with feelings instead of suppressing or avoiding them directly. Moreover, participants attributed an increased awareness of their thoughts and feelings to their capacity to cope better in life. In one example, Vanessa shared how the art used in the group inspired her to apply it in her day too day life in order to manage her stress and anxiety. She stated: "Oh I did start a board on Pinterest where I could see art and look at it if I'm feeling anxious or stressed, you know? Like what can I do, if I don't feel like doing anything I can be like okay, let's draw some of these ideas out, you know?".

In this example, seeing art would calm her anxiety and reduce her stress. If this didn't work, Vanessa could use art to express her experiences and hopefully better understand her emotions by drawing them out. This finding is consistent with the literature that supports the idea that creating art can alleviate the negative impacts of stress and anxiety. Art provides people with a focus allowing people to experience the present moment, giving your mind a break from racing thoughts. When someone gets fully immersed in a creative endeavor, they might find themselves in "the zone" or in a state of "flow" (Stuckey & Nobel, 2010, p.260). For example, when creating art, one must concentrate on the details and pay more attention to the environment. In this way, it can act as mindful meditation. By drawing, painting, or sculpting, one can make conscious or unconscious thoughts, feelings, or emotions visible and tangible through paper or clay.

Arts-Based Methods as Relevant and Meaningful

Participants described the arts-based mindfulness activities as relevant and meaningful. In both groups, some participants shared how the underlying purpose of the art activities, the mindfulness concepts we would teach, helped participant respond to challenges they were facing week to week. In the following example, one participant described how the art-based mindfulness activities throughout the sessions matched what she was trying to accomplish that same day. Vanessa stated:

> …the art-based activities were perfect each week for what I was going through. I don't know how to really explain that, but my life has been crazy and chaos, so many up and downs. So the first day when we walked in, and we did the line painting, and that was totally representative of what I was trying to accomplish that day. Painting on that line was kind of symbolic of my overall life at that time. Trying to accomplish a bunch of things and not having much control of what was happening around me…but there were

so many times I walked into group, even though I was late, the first exercise I got to participate in was somehow spot on for what I was going through that week.

In this example, Vanessa referred to an art-based mindfulness activity called Painting on a Line. In this activity, a line of a string is hung in the room, and clothespins are used to hang a single piece of paper for each participant from the line. Group members are invited to paint whatever they'd like on their paper, but they may not touch the paper with anything but a paint brush. The purpose of Painting on a Line is to remain focused on the present moment, let go of the need to control the outcome, do something creative, and have fun (Coholic, 2019). This activity often causes frustration as the paper swings on the line making a predictable outcome difficult. Moreover, other participants that are painting their pictures also affect the stability of the paper. This demonstrates interconnectedness and how our actions impact others. Through this awareness, individuals may begin to make connections about adapting your expectations in a challenging situation and the importance of being in the present moment.

Illustration 9
Group One "Painting on a Line"

While participants expressed their challenges with this activity, they also understood the important lessons behind them. In the following quote, Haven expressed why Painting on a Line was her favorite activity. She stated: "I liked painting on a line, I attempted to paint a waterfall and how I made my waterfall still look like a waterfall even with all the chaos that was happening around me. I liked how that one turned out." During our discussion, Haven shared how she was able to enjoy herself by letting go of the initial expectation she had set in her mind. Non-attachment, letting go, not grasping and clinging to outcomes, thoughts, feelings, or experiences is an integral part of being mindful. These ways of being foster present moment awareness.

Frustrations during and after this activity were also evident. Some participants expressed how difficult it was to let go of that pre-conceived image in their mind. During the activity, the loss of control was so frustrated that a few participants were trying to use their paintbrush or paper plate to hold their piece of paper in place. As we reflected on the art creations after completion, some participants shared other tricks they used to attempt to paint what they had previously envisioned. One participant said she'd wait for the women next to her to pause because in those moments the line would be momentarily still. Only then would she attempt to add specific details to her art. Jane stated:

> Painting on that line was so frustrating; everybody was frustrated, but it was also great because we learned that we're all in this together, so we have to learn to communicate to cut that frustration or learn to paint something else. I was secretly cheating, and I was trying to hold my page with my plate and my brush. That control I had when I was

> holding it was comfortable, but it's a great activity to learn to let go of that comfort, of that sense of control.

In her description, Jane made references to a sense of togetherness and how the actions of one affect the collective, and she suggests communication can foster a better understanding between group members. While Jane indicates how easy and comforting having control was, she acknowledges the value in letting go and cultivating acceptance of the chaos by adapting to the situations; in this context the movements of the pages on the line.

This activity was relevant to the chaos of participants' lives. Understandably, all participants sought a sense of control, during this activity as well as in their day to day lives. Most of the women had lost everything before seeking shelter. Despite frustrations, all the women worked together and supported one other through their original paintings, and they encouraged each other to go with the flow. Many enjoyed this activity because of the symbolic chaos. Some participants mentioned how they felt like the line and all the situations and/or people in their lives they had no control over were the pages shaking. Most importantly, moments like these allowed us to discuss the concept of accepting the things we can't control and focusing our attention on what we can control in a stressful situation.

The arts-based methods were also relevant and meaningful because they allowed participants to reclaim positive aspects of themselves and their lives. These creative methods encouraged women to live in the present in the moments of life with depth and appreciation. One important art activity that cultivated this awareness was sand memories. In this activity, participants are encouraged to construct a memory out of a variety of colored sands. In our group, the women enjoyed working with the sand, letting it flow between their fingers and moving it around on the tables. Once the sand memories are constructed, the participants can

share their memory with the group. This activity helps group members learn more about each other but also in assisting them to express feelings, thoughts, and experiences that are relevant to them. The other part of this activity is to link it with the concept of mindfulness and the importance of focusing on the present moment. For instance, we discussed how the construction of our memories are impermanent; just like our thoughts and feelings can change from moment to moment. These concepts are represented by asking each participant to sweep away their memories once the activity is completed. At this time, the women are encouraged to contemplate the significance of their mind for the present moment of their life.

The following is an example of a woman's memory of the meaningful years she had working as a bus driver. Janet stated: "In the sand, I was a school bus driver, happy as a bus driver of 21 years…surrounded by children, those were the days. I love children and here's my bus and here are the kids…I used to call them my adopted grandkids…here I'm happy. I'm happy!" In this example, when Janet shared her memories with the group, she was happy reflecting on these moments in her life and what they meant to her in the present moment. As a group, we also had the opportunity to learn more about Janet and the experiences that held the most meaning for her. In another example, one participant reflects on her experience with this activity and how it relates to her experience with her memories. Vanessa stated:

> When we were talking about memories, and then we were drawing them with sand that's what my memories kind of feels like to me, it's just stuck in this sand like the way it's stuck in my mind…where it can just be whipped away, just like the sand on the table. I feel like all the activities were very meaningful…they were thought out…like your experience creating the art meant as much as the purpose behind it.

In this example, Vanessa comments on how the experience of using art-based experimental methods such as sand, paint, or clay was as meaningful as learning the mindfulness concepts underlying each activity. By working with the sand and sweeping it away, Vanessa was able to better understand the importance of present moment experience and the impermanence of thoughts, feelings as well as her memories. These findings are consistent with those in the literature that states that art can provide people with a focus allowing people to experience the present moment (Stuckey & Nobel, 2010), and foster collaborative exploration in groups to gain insights, understanding, and deeper meaning (Lougheed, 2016).

Illustration 10
Group One "Sand Memories"

The enjoyment created by the use of arts-based methods heightened the enjoyment of program participation. Every session, new art activities would be introduced. One participant acknowledged the power of the repetitive consistency of the art within the program and the

enjoyment created by the use of art. Ultimately, the use of art made learning more effective and therapeutic, inspiring her to continue to learn and practice mindfulness through these methods. The following example is Vanessa's descriptions of the HAP:

> The artwork…like my mental knowledge, I know there's value to that, but this, learning through art…someone told me that when you're trying to build new pathways in your brain, it's through repetition. It's when you're doing it, so this group has helped me to make a conscious effort consistently, and it doesn't have to be boring; it can be playful.

In this example, Vanessa acknowledges the importance of practice and being consistent when trying to learn something new. She also demonstrated how art motivated her to become more consistent in her daily life by incorporating the playful component of art-based methods into her mindfulness practice. This finding is consistent with the literature that states that the use of art can increase brain plasticity, tolerance, and resilience in individuals (Leckey, 2011).

As previously noted, another benefit of using the arts-based methods was to offer an accessible, engaging way of learning. By drawing, painting, or sculpting, women had the opportunity to make conscious or unconscious thoughts, feelings, or emotions visible and tangible. Interestingly, at the end of the 12-week program, before our post-group interview when each participant had the opportunity to gather all their art-creations, some women acknowledged how they could see their personal growth and development through the art. The visual and tangible aspect of the art they created since the first session provided women with a sense of accomplishment. In one example, Tracy described how her experience with the art in the HAP helped her see her growth and navigate some challenges she experienced living in a shelter.

Tracy stated:

> Looking at all these paintings and all the activities I can see all the growth that has happened over these weeks. It gives me something to look at; it is almost reassuring… okay so life is shit right now, but despite that, there is learning and growth. There is a new skill set that I can use. Now I have a creative outlet and something to walk away from because even though you have these experiences, without having something tangible and visual, it's hard to recognize where your strengths lie, at least for me, especially in this environment.

As Tracy shared this observation, other group members started to organize their artwork, asking us in which sessions did we complete each art-activity. Some women were curious to see their growth and development and wanted to represent their experiences in HAP chronologically. Leaving an abusive relationship, having to start over while living in a community setting is challenging. Visually seeing the art-creations of each woman, watching them put the art together week by week were powerful moments. These displays were validating the growth of each woman, simultaneously countering any negative self-talk about not moving forward. Throughout the program, some women shared their experience of feeling stuck living in a shelter, waiting months for housing. Without housing, participants shared how everything else felt like it was on hold, including themselves. However, they are not on hold, and they are moving forward. Everyone can change, grow, and develop as a person, and in this program, their art-based creations were evidence of that change.

Benefits of Strength-Based Group Work

The theme "benefits of strength-based group work" encompasses the deliberate construction of an environment where participants experienced positivity, normalization, safety,

and non-judgment while feeling welcomed and safe, cultivating feelings of connection and belonging with facilitators and peers. Categories that illustrate this theme included feeling positivity, normalizing, fostering feelings of connection and belonging, and facilitating healing and empowerment. In past studies, the Holistic Arts-Based Program (HAP) was successful in helping marginalized adults develop group cohesion and a sense of belonging (Coholic, Eys, McAlister, Sugeng & Smith, 2018). Group work opportunities such as the HAP provide women survivors of IPV with a safe space of peers who support and encourage the sharing of thoughts and emotions in a vulnerable and authentic way.

In this first example, Vanessa explained why she valued the group environment. She stated: "just the group atmosphere, just having a safe place to talk about whatever is going on that week. [HAP] it helped to have a few familiar faces in the group, that just made it easier to get vulnerable instead of holding everything back." In this example, Vanessa indicated that seeing familiar faces in the group helped cultivate a safe, welcoming atmosphere. She also mentioned the benefits of having sessions every week. Other group members also enjoyed the weekly structure, meaning they had an opportunity every week to connect and share openly with others. In another example, Tracy explained why she valued the consistency of the program. She stated:

> [HAP] it was just a place to come and breathe and it was a safe place to express your feelings because you know the responses you will receive will be okay. Even just the consistency of the program, the fact that it's structured. They do some activities in the shelter when they have time, but nothing is offered consistently for residents if they wanted to participate. I don't know if it's because of a lack of staffing or lack of funding…but programs like these don't exist here.

Implementing a holistic strength-based group program in this shelter was a great opportunity since programs, as noted by Tracy, don't exist in this setting. This experience is consistent with the women's shelter literature that reveals the funding challenges in regards to programming, especially in northeastern Ontario locations, which are underserviced contexts. With this unique opportunity, acceptance, compassion, and non-judgment were vital components to apply to the group work to ensure a safe and supportive environment for participants. This type of environment is essential for these women to have, especially in this setting. Cultivating this atmosphere for both groups allowed participants to experience positivity, normalization of their thoughts and feelings, and decreased their feelings of loneliness.

Moreover, HAP provides playful activities for participants to collaborate, build connections, and support other women. Having this program available for residents met a critical need within the shelter. Meeting this need brought funding issues to light. At first, some of my colleagues were unsure or indifferent about us offering the HAP. Some believed there would be a lack of interest. Others mentioned their concern about asking women to commit to a 12-week program, given their challenging circumstances. However, as the weeks progressed, my colleagues began to see the changes in women as well as their commitment and enjoyment in attending and participating in the HAP. Even after participants found housing, they would return to the shelter for the group. This commitment helped the agency as a whole realize that the interest was there, and residents wanted group programs available in the shelter.

Positivity

According to Coholic (2019), the strengths-based approach to group work is to focus on participants' strengths and abilities rather than their deficits and problems. Recognizing and developing strengths throughout the program is another objective of HAP. This approach is an

excellent response to other deficit-focused methods, including crisis intervention or cognitive behavioral therapy that is widely used following a correction model focused on risks, needs, and addressing weaknesses. Alternatively, the strength-based approach emphasizes self-determination, empowering women to recognize and develop the strengths and abilities they inevitably have. The process of seeking shelter, starting over and rebuilding your life after abuse is often stressful and challenging. The positive space we cultivated through the HAP offered residents of YWCA Genevra House something playful and peaceful. This program allowed us to shift the energy in this environment from negative to positive.

Despite participants' challenging circumstances, in group, participants found positivity within themselves through the strengths-based approach of the HAP from the very first session when we established Group Rules. In this activity, participants are encouraged to think about what is essential for them in the group and what their expectations are. In keeping with a strengths perspective, the participants' are encouraged to focus on "do's" instead of "do not's." The group rules are written on a large piece of Bristol board, which is then hung in the group room for the duration of the group. Participants are then encouraged to write their names on it, which promotes ownership and group belonging. To demonstrate, in group one Group Rules included:

- Have Fun
- Be Kind
- Be compassionate
- Keep it confidential
- Be nice
- Believe in yourself
- Try something new

Focusing on "do's" helped us as a group shift from negative to positive. For comparative purposes, each week, staff will meet with residents in the shelter to discuss any concerns or

questions they might have. During these house meetings, the language used to communicate rules and regulations are often expressed as "do not's" instead of "do's." For example, common items on our house meeting list include: no gossiping, no bullying, do not take pictures in common areas, do not miss curfew, etc. All of these rules are important as they support shelter operations while ensuring women and their children feel at home in a safe and secure environment where their identity and information is kept confidential. However, these rules can be communicated differently. Using a strengths-based approach, the information can be communicated as "do's." For instance, be kind, or please consider other residents' personal space and/or privacy. A strengths-based perspective offers a different language to describe issues or risks. It allows one to see opportunities, hope, and solutions rather than just problems and hopelessness. Having a chance to offer this shift of perspective in the HAP was fundamental to work with and facilitate; rather than fixing or pointing to the dysfunction we could be more curious, exploratory, and hopeful with participants.

Throughout the HAP, the strengths-based perspective had a holistic focus that includes an emphasis on women's strengths and resources in the process of change. For instance, when women disclosed experiences with challenges, problems, or issues, we acknowledged and validated, and strengths were identified and highlighted. Consequently, this process often changed the story of their problems as it created more positive expectations that things can be different and opened the way for the development of capabilities. In this example, Janet shared how, in HAP, she finally received the love and kindness she was giving to others for so long. She stated: "as women, we are givers of all the love and all the kindness we offer to everybody else…in the [HAP] it was nice to have a place to get some of that back and see all the positive things within yourself, I just bloomed in everything I did in here [HAP]."

This example supports that building self-esteem and creating a positive self-awareness comes from taking an inventory of your strengths and abilities. Understanding who you are and what you have to offer the world is an important part of developing positive self-esteem. The exchange of loving-kindness and compassion in the group cultivated an increased self-awareness and authenticity in participants. Becoming more aware of their strengths allowed women to think of themselves as deserving of attention and admiration while seeing challenges as opportunities to employ those strengths.

In another example, Susan demonstrates the shift of paradigms between the shelter and the administrative boardroom where we facilitated the HAP group. She stated: "HAP was a bubble within the shelter building, where there was a safer place, somewhere more playful and positive, it was nice." The boardroom where we facilitated the HAP is usually only available for staff members. In the HAP, participants felt temporarily removed from the shelter environment and its regular processes. While only one door separated the HAP and the shelter, the boardroom provided participants with a different environment. Notably, another participant mentioned the friendly and generous reception she received from the facilitators in the HAP and how much she valued that experience. Tracy stated:

> Initially, I was apprehensive about joining the group because Stephanie would have represented staff, but in here [HAP] she doesn't wear that hat, and those boundaries are very clear. Just the fact that she called this morning to say 'Hey, are you coming today?' it's those extra little things… it was just reassuring and helpful. I've seen her do that to other women too; she'll say 'Hey, are you coming to the group today?' there's just an element of hospitality that is encouraging and supportive […] those strength-based aspects of it [HAP] made it so much easier to want to attend.

In this example, for Tracy, the hospitality facilitators and I had towards participants nurtured a warmth and created a welcoming environment where women could find comfort in belonging to a group and the feeling of sincere acceptance and importance. Finding more positivity in the HAP also allowed participants to challenge how they see themselves and their body-image. One activity that helped women recognize all the positive things they have to offer was Body Beautiful. This activity was adapted from the book *104 Activities That Build: Self-Esteem, Teamwork, Communication, Anger Management, Self-Discovery, Coping Skills* (Jones, 1998). In this activity, a piece of brown craft paper large enough to trace one of the group members' bodies is placed on the floor. The facilitator then asks one of the group members to volunteer to be traced. The remainder of the group members works together to trace the outline of the volunteer. Next, the group members are asked to write strengths and positive attributes beside the relevant body parts on the outline. The participants and facilitators can also add any positive observations that they have made about each other and include these on the outline as well (Coholic, 2019) (see illustration 11 below).

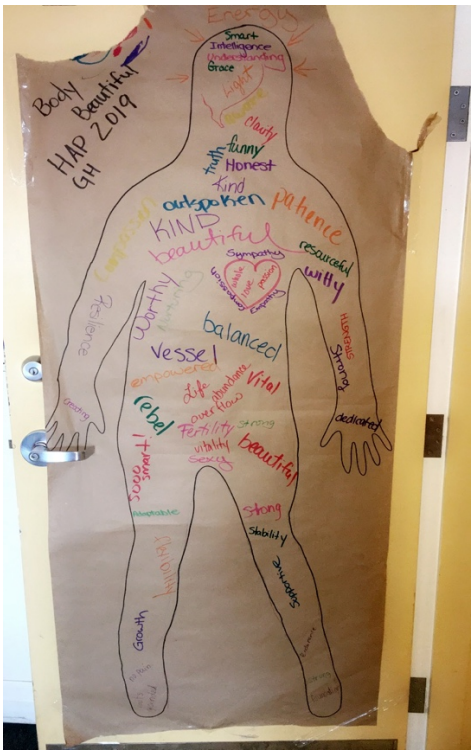

Illustration 11
Group One's "Body Beautiful"

In this example, participants from group one included the words: smart, intelligence, understanding, grace, light, awareness, clarity (in the mind), truth, funny, honest, kind, outspoken (near the mouth), strong, dedicated, resilient, resourceful, stability and growth (arms and legs), sympathy, love, compassion and passion (heart centre), balanced, vessel, empowered, rebel, life, fertility, and vitality (in the core). This activity helped the women see all the positive things they have to offer and to be grateful for. Simply speaking about women's positive attributes helped participants reflect on their strengths and increase feelings of confidence and self-esteem. Both groups were described by participants as a positive place where they could identify their strengths and be accepted for who they are. These findings are consistent with those in the literature that describe group work as a supportive "outlet to satisfy social needs for affection, belonging, acceptance, self-esteem, and actualization" (Drumm, 2006, p.25).

Normalizing

The concept of normalization is defined by the action or process of making emotional and behavioral experiences normal through the validation and acceptance of others (Herman, 2015). In many circumstances, women struggling with trauma do not have the opportunity to develop the skills necessary to manage their emotions, establish and achieve personal goals, or increase relational skills (Herman, 2015). Moreover, they do not have an opportunity to promote the normalization of their experiences. They interpret their behaviours as strange rather than normal reactions to abnormal events (Herman, 2015). Other women may not feel comfortable participating in traditional counselling environments or one-on-one therapy sessions (Herman, 2015). Consequently, they choose not to seek support, continuing to struggle, isolated and alone. According to Tesh, Learman, and Pulliam (2015) group work for survivors creates opportunity to link individuals' experiences to the stories of others' suffering which provides comfort and normalizes survivors' difficult feelings or circumstances and thereby reduces shame. The process of normalization helps group members identify their similar experiences, which in turn allows them to relate with one another and build connections.

To this day, trauma is still misunderstood as a rare experience (Herman, 2015). Contrary to this, group discussions helped participants recognized how prevalent traumas are in the lives of many women survivors. Vulnerable dialogue between group members reduced feelings of isolation. Moreover, the group work component of the HAP promotes normalization (Coholic, 2019). In the following example, Donna described how being able to relate to other women's stories helped her be more comfortable sharing her own. She stated: "I think you can relate to some of the things that the other women are going through and I think it opened us up. It opened me up, in my own ability to express and touch base with my own emotions." Other participants also described how identifying with other group members' experiences in the group helped them

feel less isolated. Julie stated: "just knowing that I'm not the only one that went through some of these things, that I'm not the only one struggling through this, that's been helpful." In another example, one participant shared how seeing others open up in a vulnerable way, motivated her to focus on developing her strengths. Jane stated: "Overall, I feel like I've developed a lot for strengths but what's been the most helpful for me is seeing other women open up, an important part of my experience was the group aspect of it [HAP]."

The purpose of the Group Coat of Arms (aka Group Symbol) activity is to help develop group cohesion and to establish a group identity. Participants are invited to collaborate to construct a group symbol that is representative of themselves as a group so that they co-create a group identity and develop group cohesion (Coholic, 2019). In group one, the group members agreed to make the group's symbol represent love, growth, strength, and mother earth. Love (a big heart and sun); Growth (a sprout about to flourish at the bottom of the heart); Strength (stitches on the heart/ stitches becoming fresh green grass), and finally, all women in the group representing Mother Earth with Earth in the shape of a heart (see illustration 12 below).

Illustration 12
Group One's "Group Symbol"

In group two, the group members agreed to make the group's symbol a stop sign with arrows representing all the cycle of thoughts and behaviors they want to 'stop' or break free from. These include perfectionism, being afraid, no control, negative thinking, self-destruction, self-judgment, distractions, distorted thinking, and putting others first. Each woman then added a flower around the stop sign to represent themselves (see illustration 13 below).

Illustration 13
Group Two "Group Symbol"

Through weekly participation, participants became increasingly comfortable with the other members by engaging in the art activities that foster group cohesion. In group one, seeking love, growth, and strength during this time was important for all group members. In group two, wanting to stop experiencing challenges with fear, judgment, and negative thought patterns and behaviors was a collective desire. These similarities helped the groups experience normalization where women felt their stories were heard, represented, accepted, and validated.

Safe and Supportive Space

According to Coholic (2019), the group work component of the HAP promotes

connection and belonging, offering participants a nurturing environment. Fostering a safe, nonjudgmental environment encourages group member's self-discovery through an openness for creative and experiential exploration. In this example, Kimberly mentioned how she was afraid to share at first, but in this environment, she began to trust again. She stated: "at first, it was hard to share because I didn't know everyone and you never know if that person is going to say something to someone else, but with time I felt better about sharing." In this environment, participants could start to rebuild trust. Many participants shared how by trusting again in this group helped them cultivate healthier relationships. In the following example, Tracy describes her journey from rigid independence to being open to asking others for help. She stated:

> I've always lived in this kind of state where I have to look out for myself because nobody else did but that almost turned into rigid independence. In this group, I've learned that we do all need each other. I'm so thankful for [Janet, Vanessa, Donna, Marilyn, Kimberly, and Susan]. I need all of you, and I've learned a lot from building healthy relationships to conflict resolutions […] coming out of a relationship where you end up isolated, a place like [HAP] can allow you to reconnect with other people. By connecting, you realize oh right there is a world beyond my own. I loved hearing Donna's stories about her life and her travels or Susan's story about what she lived through. It's through other people's stories that you realize that you're bigger than your problems and that they won't last forever. In [HAP], you had the opportunity to connect with people outside of yourself, outside of your family, and that opportunity allowed me to accept that help.

The group environment allowed for participants to become more comfortable with vulnerability. Feeling safe to open up in this group helped women share their experiences and build healthy relationships with other group members. Reconnection fostered interconnection. As

noted by Tracy, hearing other women's experiences helped her gain a new perspective on her challenges. Tracy mentioned the concept of impermanence and change, truths that are undeniable to our lives. This environment also helped her see that's it's okay to need people and to ask for help. In another example, one participant described having a similar experience in the group. Vanessa stated:

> There is just so much bullshit I have to encounter in a day, so this group has been beyond helpful for me. Something for my personal life, just connecting and learning that sometimes you have to let go and allow other people to help you. I learned more interdependence; this group has been a great format to do that, it's just healthy and helpful when you come in here, and there are people for you, not just for themselves.

In this example, Vanessa demonstrates the lack of social group work in shelter settings. When women access shelters, workers are there to help them, however, not peers. Today, in shelters across northeastern Ontario, where funding is scarce, dominant theoretical perspectives for direct practice are crisis intervention, cognitive behavioral therapy, and motivational interviewing (Johnson & Zlotnick, 2006). These interventions are provided individually. The disadvantages of these methods are the exclusion of social group work, where survivors can connect and create support groups. In the following example, Tracy supports the need for more of these opportunities for women in the shelter. She stated:

> There is a strong need for programs I can attest to that personally. I've been here for over six months …it's a long time, it starts to feel like a prison, it starts to feel like you're closed in. It is a shelter, yes, but it should feel more like a sanctuary. It shouldn't be like this where we all have to lock ourselves in our rooms because you're not allowed to talk to people about your stuff. Also, not every woman in here has the luxury or opportunity

> to feel safe going in the community right now to access services. So the fact that HAP is here is great. There is just a need, a need for a safe outlet and HAP has provided that outlet.

These findings are consistent with the literature on women's shelters that indicate the challenges of community living, the lack of programming for women, and the feelings of isolation and loneliness. In this example, Tracy refers to one of the shelter directives that ask women to not share or go into too much detail about their experiences of abuse with other residents. The intention behind this suggestion is to avoid triggering other women and keeping situations and identities confidential. However, rules of this nature inhibit feelings of connection and belonging, especially when it is advised without providing women with a safer alternative, a safer outlet where they can share their stories and connect with other women.

Both groups were described by participants as safe, welcoming, and supportive. More specifically, a different atmosphere, a bubble of happiness in the shelter, and a peaceful sanctuary. A place where they felt they could ask and receive the help they wanted, not from professionals but their peers. These findings are consistent with the literature that described social group work as providing social, emotional or practical support that is mutual and reciprocal (Dies, 1995), allowing participants to benefit from the support whether they are giving or receiving it. Built on shared personal experience and empathy, focused on women's strengths, the work can result in enhanced self-esteem and social support towards women's wellbeing and empowerment.

Fostering Feelings of Connection and Belonging

Since the experiences of women in shelters can be challenging and isolating, providing women with a place to connect and belong in shelters is important to foster healing and

empowerment. In HAP, facilitators are responsible for fostering a safe environment that encourages individuals to express themselves and build connections (Coholic, Oystrick, Posteraro, & Lougheed, 2016). Moreover, the deliberate use of social group work in the HAP, where facilitators are consciously encouraging the development of group cohesion, a sense of belonging, and mutual aid where group members can help one another (Coholic, 2019) support the benefits of group work.

One activity that demonstrates the different ways in which people experience the same stimulus is Emotion Listen and Paint. In this activity, the facilitator's record/save five short excerpts (approximately one or two minutes each) of a variety of different songs and music to an audio file. To being this activity, each group member is given five 5 x 7 sheets of paper. They are entrusted to number their pages from 1 to 5. Next, the women listen to each piece of music and quickly paint the feeling that they are experiencing while listening to the song. As each picture is completed, they are placed in rows according to the piece of music so that similarities and differences between the participants' painting can be revealed. The purpose of this activity is to quickly demonstrate on paper the feeling that is evoked by the music.
(Coholic, 2019) (see illustration 14 below).

Illustration 14
Group Two's "Emotion, Listen, & Paint"

This activity offers participants the opportunity to experience how each song makes them feel. Placing all the pictures in a row allows participants to better understand themselves and others by identifying the differences and similarities in the paintings. Important discussions followed this activity about how people experience the same song differently and linking this to common stressors and challenges. The group participation and seeing some similarities between the painting fostered interconnectedness while the differences demonstrated diversity and compassion for another women's experience including feelings, needs, and desires. For instance, in group one, one song excerpt we played in this activity was from the band Metallica. Janet felt so stressed from the music she froze and didn't paint during this song. Meanwhile, Kimberly asked if we could play the excerpt again so she could get more paint. For Janet, this song triggered her while the same song empowered Kimberly. Group activities such as Emotion,

Listen, and Paint allows us to see our differences, not as faults but as reminders to be compassionate and nonjudgmental of other women's experiences and the different ways in which they respond and cope in response to stress, abuse or trauma.

Furthermore, the support fostered in the HAP encourages women to open up and learn from one another. In this example, Susan described how the group environment helped her learn from other women and open up. She stated: “I learned from hearing others experiences, I learned some lessons from them and through the artwork. Whenever I come here [HAP] my stress levels subside because I get a support group that helps me, they are willing to listen, and I feel like it helps me open up." Having other group members interested and willing to listen was another powerful aspect of both groups. Participants were not just welcomed into the group, but accepted and valued as important members contributing to the overall experience of group work.

Healing and Empowerment

Overall participation in the HAP has provided women with an opportunity to cultivate their own healing process; by learning mindfulness skills and concepts (awareness and insight), using arts-based experiential methods (self-discovery/reconstruction of self), and being part of a strength-based group (connection, belonging, and meaning). Throughout the HAP, seven of the 10 participants reported experiencing some abuse when they were growing up. Many of the participants expressed an understanding of the effect of their experiences of childhood abuse on their adult relationships. Many participants disclosed their struggle with self-compassion which involves "offering nonjudgmental understanding to one’s pain, inadequacies and failures, so that one’s experience is seen as part of the larger human experience” (Neff, 2010, p.87). Further, women demonstrated a strong recognition of how their sense of self was eroded throughout their experiences of IPV.

In the HAP, participants gained more self-awareness, which is a part of healing. Women learned more about their thoughts, feelings, and emotions and how to sit with difficult emotions differently. Once they had more understanding of their stress and pain, they could decide whether to accept or respond to those difficult feelings. The root of mindfulness is to relieve human suffering, to increase compassion, and to help individuals find the path to enlightenment (Armstrong, 2001). By actively paying attention in the present moment, women experienced less stress and the development of new coping skills. Being more mindful also helped participants be aware of their negative self-judgment. The power of mindfulness is the ability to recognize your thoughts and realizing that you are not your thoughts by choosing not to identify with what your thoughts are saying. Pre-group, most of the participants in both groups mentioned avoidant behaviors as ways to cope with trauma symptoms. Post-group, the participants had new ways to identify, experience, and express the thoughts and emotions associated with traumatic memories. Ultimately, the process of attending to these painful emotions could be met with more self-compassion and acceptance rather than self-blame and avoidance.

Next, the use of arts-based experiential methods helped participants heal because they could learn and express themselves in relevant and meaningful ways, even if they didn't have the words to do so. The arts helped survivors to instill self-empowerment, assist in healing symptoms associated with IPV, and teach survivors to cope with feelings of self-blame, lack of self-worth and self-esteem, shame and guilt, lack of confidence, fear, mistrust, stress and avoidance behaviors. They also helped women discover and re-claim themselves. Several of the participants demonstrated a strong awareness of how control, both the demands and maintenance of it by their partners, played a role in their relationships. Their partners dictated almost everything about their lives including who they could talk to, and when, who they could visit and

when, what work they could do, how they could spend their money, and how they could parent their children. An art activity that allowed them to take their power back was Power Boxes. In this activity, group members are encouraged to create and decorate their own “power” boxes by decorating it in the manner they choose (see illustration 15 below).

Illustration 15
Group One’s “Power Boxes”

Discussion is facilitated about power and control what we control and don't control in our lives, what brings us "power" and energy and makes us feel good, and what types of things take our power away. We relate this to mindfulness in that there is a lot we don’t control, such as other people. However, we can focus on what we do control instead of trying to make others happy. Many survivors feel like their lives are out of control, and justifiably so, having been through abuse, many for most of their lives, they often carry guilt and shame for things that have happened to them. To cope with the effects of IPV, many have developed maladaptive ways of coping instead of dealing with pain in healthier and effective ways. Haven and Jane, two

participants from group two, shared how being more aware of their thoughts, feelings, and emotions helped them gain a sense of power and control over their lives. These perspectives are apparent in the following excerpts:

> I liked it; it was a new experience, the art, and the mindfulness approach was different because it made you more mindful, more aware that you have more control over your day than everything else that happens or has been affecting you. - Haven
>
> For me, it's about the unexpected and facing things you don't want to, facing an ex who's going to lie through his teeth and how to face that without reacting… HAP taught me to be more self-aware and to practice mindfulness to control, I hate that word control, I don't know if I can control the situation, but I'm going to be aware of myself and remind myself of the activities we've tried, in situations that I can't control, I'll try to be mindful -Jane

Before you can regain a sense of power, you need to recognize how you give your power away and how to differentiate what you can control versus what you cannot control. Gaining more awareness can help you take your power back by focusing on what you can control. In the group, what I noticed to be helpful for participants was the strength-based group work, and the opportunity to receive a fresh perspective from other group members during activities and discussions. This new perspective wasn't coming from a family member or friend; it was coming from someone outside of their close relationships, which have been through similar situations. In group, as women developed their self-awareness, some developed an awareness of their partners' insecurities at the root of their controlling behaviors. The women also indicated an awareness of how their interactions with their communities, family, and friends played either a negative,

unhealthy role or a positive, supportive role. The participants demonstrated their understanding of the role of their communities in their stories of abuse and their healing process.

Along with demonstrating their increased awareness and insight, many of the women also described re-claiming of selves, their lives, and their relationships in their narratives. Several participants described experiencing changes in how they view themselves, in their ability to be assertive and set boundaries, in their comfort being on their own, in their feelings of empowerment, in their mental health, and their relationships with their children and families. Group members also supported how being able to reflect and gain more awareness in this space helped them feel empowered. Julie, one participant from group two, shared how being more aware of herself helped her learn to be more assertive and direct in certain situations. During her post-group interview, she declared:

> I learned communication; the way I communicate. Sometimes, instead of saying what I want I hint towards it…I notice it in my home life. For example, If I want to watch a movie, I will hint towards it, it won't happen, and I won't bring it up again like I won't voice my… I'll casually bring something up, but I won't be like okay let's do it! but now I can be less passive and more assertive.

In this example, Julie learned more about the way she communicates. This awareness has allowed her to step out of her conditioned habitual behavior and see the opportunities to use her voice to express her thoughts and feelings. Again, the women were empowered by their heightened awareness to build on and recognize their strengths. Experiencing empowerment refers to the restoration of both internal and external control; participants' sense of strength and themselves, and their ability to make choices in their lives.

Women regained a sense of control over their lives by creating a gap between experiencing and reacting to emotions. Participants empowered themselves by developing their sense of their power, aided by the support they received from group members. Participants empowerment was also illustrated through the pride they showed in themselves and their accomplishments about how they had overcome such significant challenges to be able to leave their relationship and heal from abuse. Many of the women expressed feeling ashamed of their judgment. Some of the participants depicted a change in their perspective through their acceptance and forgiveness of themselves. Their self-acceptance and self-compassion were implied in their description of "doing the best they could with the knowledge they had at the time" and their feelings of peace and contentment. Gratitude was also evident in some of the participants' narratives they expressed in the aftermath of IPV. The gratitude of these women helped them find meaning in their experiences. A few women expressed their relief at being out of their abusive relationships, such as Janet who declared: "I told him it was the best thing he ever did... to tell me to get out. I said it hurt a lot at first, but it helped me."

Along with their pride, forgiveness, and gratitude, some participants' hope for the future also demonstrated their process of healing and empowerment through a change in perspective from hearing other women's stories. Additionally, some participants found meaning by helping other women in the group; from victims of IPV into survivors of IPV who help other women by offering a supportive ear when these women need to talk, in the group and outside of the group. Women articulated how participating in the HAP allowed them to reflect on and share their experiences. Further, some of these women expressed that their desire to participate in the group also stemmed from wanting to offer support and help to other women who are experiencing similar challenges.

One activity that demonstrates the overall experiences women had in the HAP is Group Poem. Before the last week of the program, the group brainstorms a list of words that describe how they feel about the group. The lists can be done individually and then shared as a group. Then the group uses the words to create a poem about the group. The following is Group Two's poem.

Made my week easier
We needed to share
An extra layer of thought
Nice to hear laughter
See familiar faces
We built connections- friendships
In a very positive space
We all belong here
We are not alone
We can support each other
Welcome each other- in this space
Unique but similar
Different but creative
We are brave & strong
We learned how to smile & open up a again
We learned from each other
Through different art
We were made aware of who we are & how we are behaving in the moment.
We explored, gained awareness & felt grounded
This helped create a gap between emotion and reaction
Remember, act.

This poem also highlights what women thought were the best things about the group. It also reveals the strong connections that had developed among these group members. Both groups were described by participants as communities where women can connect, learn, and empower one another. According to Sullivan, Juras, Bybee, Nguyen, and Allen (2000), creating a safe, nonjudgmental space for women survivors of violence to express their thoughts, feelings, and fears can help them work through past trauma and learn cope more effectively with stress. Overall, participants acknowledged the benefits of group work for support, mutual aid,

acceptance, connection, and belonging. Being part of the group helped women dismantle the normalcy of abuse, better understand trauma, normalize thoughts and feelings, and create a path for healing and empowerment through sharing and group discussion in a safe environment.

Summary

In summary, these findings contribute to the small body of literature exploring the delivery of MBIs to women survivors of IPV in emergency shelters. This chapter illustrates how survivors of IPV experienced participation in an emerging MBI, which helped mitigate the negative effects of their stress, offered them more effective strategies to cope with stressors, and cultivated a path of healing. In the next final chapter, I provide a brief summary of the current study including a review of the study's purpose, its central findings, and the implications of these findings. I also outline the limitations of the study and provide recommendations for future research.

Chapter Four
Conclusion

In this concluding chapter, I provide a summary of the current study including a review of the study's purpose, its central findings, and the implications of these findings for YWCA Violence Against Women (VAW) shelters, women survivors of Intimate Partner Violence (IPV), and social work. I also outline the limitations of the study and provide recommendations for future research.

Summary of the Study

As this study illuminated, women survivors of IPV in emergency shelters face a multitude of potential mental health-related challenges and concerns. YWCA services are deemed essential in helping women and children make a transition to a life free of violence. However, their organizational structures and funding have experienced their challenges in meeting the needs of all women and children who seek their services. Moreover, northern Ontario, where this research was conducted, faces inequities in healthcare and accessible community support services when compared with the rest of the province (Al-Harmad & O'Gorman, 2016). Northern Ontario shelters are often at capacity, having to waitlist or transport women and children to other shelters, while access to support services are limited (YWCA, 2018). Therefore, it is relevant to explore possible interventions that could be feasibly offered in our region.

My research project offers insight into the impact of delivering a mindfulness-based intervention to a small number of abused women in local emergency shelter for IPV in Sudbury, Ontario. In this study, we discovered numerous reported benefits of mindfulness-based intervention (MBIs) that suggest abused women experience similar results compared to the general adult populations, which included reduced stress, anxiety and judgment, and increased

self-awareness, acceptance, well-being, self-regulation, self-expression, self-compassion, presence, and more effective ways of coping (Holzel et al., 2011; Ludwig & Kabat-Zinn, 2008) with no adverse effects.

This study contributes to the current body of literature demonstrating the benefits of MBIs and supports the Holistic Arts-Based Program (HAP), as a beneficial and suitable MBI strategy for women survivors of IPV living in emergency shelters. The uniqueness of the HAP is the fun and engaging nature of the program that promotes the accessibility of learning and practicing mindfulness. In this regard, the HAP has the potential to be an essential part of the national shelter strategy; see the National Shelter Survey (2016) report, which is a report that emphasizes the importance of listening to the voices of women who use their services, talking to residents, ex-residents, and participants in the shelter and non-residential VAW programs, and asking about the services they received, and whether the two are congruent. This research project provides further information concerning the best evidence-informed practices which can begin to help securing other funding to develop a critical analysis of what options are available and what works best in support groups for women.

The YWCA National Shelter Survey (2016) acknowledges that women's shelters require innovative, cost-effective supports that use a trauma-informed perspective to meet the diverse needs of their residents. They propose VAW shelters collaborate with local and provincial agencies to develop effective solutions and implement best practices that can empower women. The HAP may be considered part of this solution, as it is an effective and viable prevention and promotion intervention that works with strengths-based and trauma-informed perspectives. The HAP also aims to build resilience, which may result in improved overall mental health and well-being of women in shelters. I hope this study can help broaden the view of how to assist women

more holistically, helping professionals look beyond defining women by their relationship to an abusive partner, and to view the person that they are and now wish to reclaim.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to explore the suitability and benefits of participation in a 12-week arts-based mindfulness group program aimed to help foster abused women's mindfulness skills and improve their ability to cope with stressors. This study analyzed new data regarding the use of an emerging MBI with abused women living in a local emergency shelter, with an emphasis on the need for evidence-based practices focused on helping empower women survivors of IPV with forethought to initiate these strategies in VAW shelters. The literature review revealed that although there has been previous investigation into the delivery of MBIs to survivors of IPV, this research is limited and significant gaps remain. These gaps include understanding how mindfulness interventions may serve to mitigate the negative effects of IPV, what type of formal and/or informal mindfulness is required to achieve maximum benefit, and what approaches may be taken to reduce abused women's attrition in an MBI. My project addressed this gaps within a northern Ontario context where persistent inequities in health services and outcomes remain. To summarize the outcomes of the analysis, next, I review each research question and the associated findings.

Main Findings

1. **Does participation in a 12-week mindfulness arts-based group program improve women IPV survivor's skills in mindfulness and change their perceptions of the stress they are experiencing?**

The main research question explored two primary aspects (improved mindfulness skills and improved awareness of their relationship with stress) of women's participation in the HAP,

an emerging arts-based MBI with survivors of IPV. The current study findings support the suitability, relevance, and benefits of HAP for women survivors of IPV living in emergency shelters, based on the consistency of attendance, active participation with the activities, and subsequent discussions about their experiences in the group. Although a few participants were unable to complete the program, feedback from those during the post-group interviews described the program as positive and helpful. It is important to note that the total number of participants was small to begin with, and four participants did not complete or attend a post-interview. Nonetheless, these findings support that suitability and benefits of this program for women survivors of IPV, and may also be indicative of the program's potential suitability for the larger populations of IPV survivors living in emergency shelters. Before this research, the MBIs implemented with survivors of IPV have been more traditional, focused on relieving symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and based on the Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) program. HAP uses arts-based methods which may be more accessible to a larger population.

2. **What are their experiences in the HAP?**

After a thorough analysis of the data, I found three interconnected themes that illuminated women's experiences of program participation. These three central themes are (1) Benefits of learning mindfulness-based skills/concepts, (2) Benefits of Arts-Based Experiential Methods, and (3) Benefits of Strength-Based Group Work. The thematic map of the data generated through the data analysis mirrors the conceptual map of the program goals (see illustration X). This further supports the findings that suggest the effect of participation in the HAP achieved the program goals established by Dr. Diana Coholic and colleagues in the development of the program.

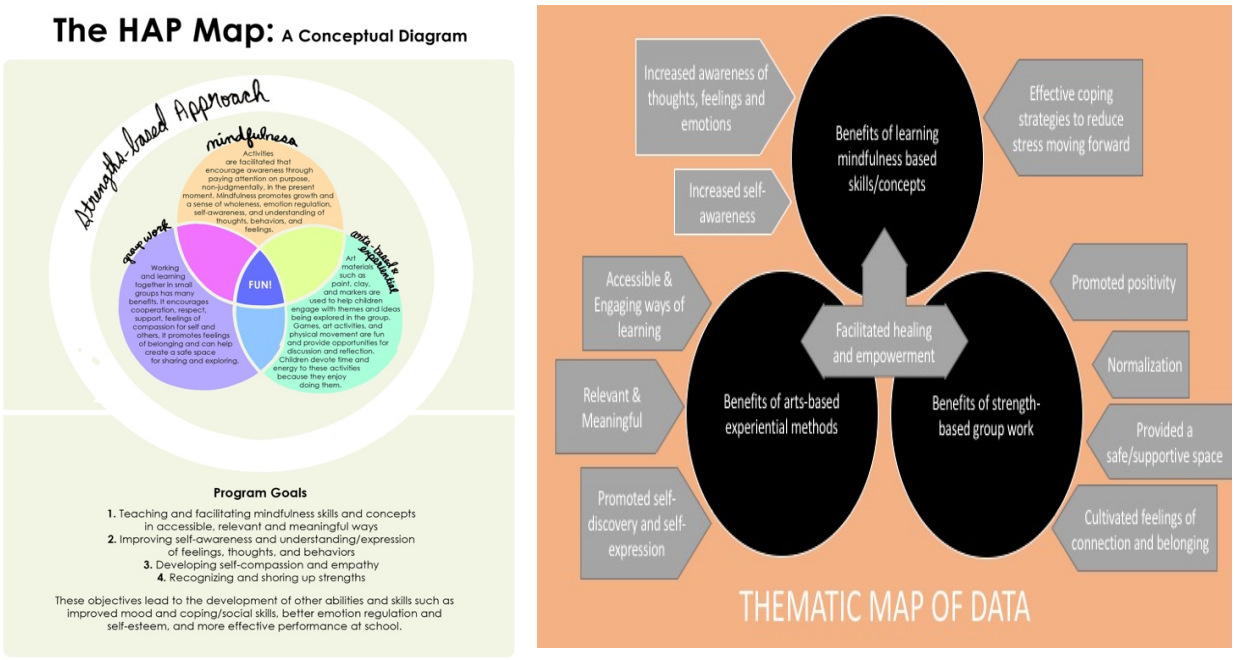

Illustration 16

HAP Map and Thematic Map of Data

Each of these themes is interconnected to sub-themes identified to further illustrate women's experiences of their participation in the HAP. The theme of Benefits of Learning Mindfulness-Based Skill/Concepts is comprised of three sub-themes that include increased awareness of thoughts, feelings and emotion, increased self-awareness, and effective coping strategies to reduce stress moving forward. The theme Benefits of Arts-Based Experiential Methods is comprised of three sub-themes that include arts-based methods helped make mindfulness concepts accessible, relevant, and promoted self-discovery and self-expression. The theme Benefits of Strength-Based Group Work is comprised of four sub-themes that include finding positivity, normalizing, feeling safe and supportive, and fostering feelings of connection

and belonging. All three themes interconnect by facilitating healing and empowerment for women participants.

These central themes demonstrate the women's experiences of participation in the program which fostered skills to mitigate the negative impacts of stress and trauma, cultivated the practice of mindfulness, and provided women a foundation of knowledge to begin coping more effectively with the effects of IPV. Furthermore, participants acknowledged the benefits of arts-based methods for learning mindfulness concepts, and women described how their engagement in playful, creative, art activities made learning mindfulness accessible and engaging. Participants felt that the art activities in the HAP played an important role in promoting self-awareness, self-discovery, and self-expression.

Having a safe place to engage in arts-based methods and share their experiences was described as a relief from their regular stressful days. Participation in this emerging MBI helped women cope more effectively with the negative effects of stress, and offered them practical strategies to cope with stress moving forward. Participation in this emerging MBI also provided women with an opportunity to share their stories in a safe non-judgmental space. The following excerpt from one participant from group one illustrates the power of the HAP. Tracy stated:

> To be in a place [HAP] where people are reflecting you…you feel that you are worthy of love, that you have strengths, because you have positive attributes coming from all people around you. Especially in this environment where you're coming from abuse, and your self-esteem is low. For me, it didn't matter what I did or had done to be successful or resilient, according to the world, it wasn't enough because I'm still here [shelter]. But in HAP there's a warmth and a place of acceptance….to build up other women and to be built back up again. That's what the positive experience about being here was for me.

In this example, Tracy articulated how being in a group with other women helped her recognize and develop her worth and strengths. Her experience further supports the importance of implementing programs that foster self-awareness, connection, and belonging by creating a safe, non-judgmental space for women to express themselves without judgment.

My time with these women revealed that though they were experiencing various negative effects related to their experiences of IPV, they were all working towards healing from their abuse. The women in these groups experienced various types of abuse and were in various stages of exiting their abusive relationships. Some women had been out of their relationship for some time and expressed confidence in staying away from their abusive ex-partners, while other women indicated that they were struggling to maintain staying away. All of these women, however, demonstrated a desire for healing and a life free of IPV. My experiences working with and listening to these women's stories have shaped my understanding that IPV is more than violence; it's primarily an issue of power and control over women that can take many forms. Along with sharing their own stories, I wanted to allow the participants to share what they would want to tell other women coming into the shelter about their experiences in the HAP. After one of our sessions, I provided participants in group one, small pieces of paper, and these are the words they wanted to say to other women coming into the shelter about their experiences in this group (see illustration X below).

Illustration 17
Group One's "Experiences in the HAP"

Implications for VAW Shelters and Women Survivors of IPV

Since I started working with women survivors of IPV, I understood the importance of empowering women and their children by considering the whole person in body, mind, and spirit. To achieve social justice and equity for all women, we must build healthy communities, free from violence, racism, and other abuses of power, and nurture the whole person. This belief has guided my interest in conducting this research into the delivery of the holistic philosophy of mindfulness within our local women's shelter.

Learning HAP

This research study showed the HAP to be a suitable and beneficial intervention for women survivors of IPV on a personal level helping them to manage their stress and build strengths. When we reflect on the needs of women in shelters and the financial challenges indicated in the National Annual Report, we begin to appreciate the need to direct our attention to collaborating on effective evidence-informed strategies to empower women from the beginning of their shelter stay.

Participation in HAP increased women's understanding of, and capacity to, embody mindfulness in their lives. As mentioned earlier in the literature review, researchers suggest that MBIs be delivered by mindfulness practitioners (Ludwig & Kabat-Zinn, 2008). Within the research, mindfulness facilitators are required to develop, build, and sustain their daily mindfulness practice. For future program delivery, this is an important consideration when recommending shelter staff members to facilitate mindfulness with residents. While mindfulness is something we can all naturally possess, it's more readily available to us when we practice on a daily basis. Mindfulness is available to use in every moment, whether through meditations and body scans or mindful moment practices by paying attention to our sensations, our emotions, and thoughts with warmth and kindness, to ourselves and others. Without cultivating a personal mindfulness practice, shelter staff who are interested in teaching mindfulness risk introducing concepts they themselves do not understand or practice.

My own experience working as a shelter support worker has taught me that the health and mental health challenges women were facing had a huge impact on my ability to help them. Working with survivors of abuse is difficult, painful, and challenging. I have experienced physical exhaustion, high stress, compassion-fatigue, and feelings of helplessness which have directly affected my efficiency at work. At work, the awareness cultivated through my mindfulness practice helped me hold stress and negativity differently. Mindfulness allowed me to embrace the stress which in turn allowed me to better regulate the associated emotions.

Accordingly, learning mindfulness concepts in HAP increased my ability to foster positive relationships by being better able to relate to, understand and support others. Staff who practice mindfulness can better foster relationships with residents, understand, and support their needs. A s a result, less stressed and more mindful shelter staff members can better respond to

the various needs of the residents thus decreasing women's and children's stress and further fostering a safe, supportive environment in shelter settings.

Furthermore, these professional development opportunities can translate to specific modes of delivery of the HAP to this population. For instance, the regular 12-week group program with all new women could be offered in a closed group. Also, adding an open workshop (maybe bi-weekly) for women who have completed the program and want refreshers/connection or those who want to see what it is about (as recruitment for the regular program) is a possibility. One experienced facilitator can lead the program while adding two co-facilitators who can be trained in the group work/methods (a train the trainer model). This could be employees from the agency or employees across agencies. By collaborating with other local agencies, programming can build capacity and sustainability within the agency.

The other possibility for co-facilitator trainees is social work students doing field placements at YWCA Genevra House who can be trained in the program and help to facilitate. Potential collaboration can also be established with the social work department at Laurentian University. Social work students can learn how to facilitate the program as part of their field placement experience. Student field placements at YWCA Genevra House often lead to employment; an opportunity that can help build capacity and suitability within the agency. Alternatively, mindfulness could be incorporated in a supportive counseling program that includes safety planning, empowerment, and stress management, where mindfulness concepts are introduced by shelter workers who are practicing mindfulness and have knowledge regarding the practice and concepts of mindfulness. The program, initially designed for youth, is considered engaging and fun; therefore, it can easily be translated into shelter-based activities and may help to strengthen the capacities of residents.

Innovative and Effective Shelter-Based Practices

Due to the growing need to further understand women's experiences in shelters, this study offers insights into those experiences. This study goes beyond individual-based brief therapies and explores negative emotional responses such as self-blame and shame, as well as mental health outcomes such as depression, anxiety, and PTSD. Although not commonly utilized with survivors of IPV living in emergency shelters, this study indicates that learning mindfulness concepts in group could improve emotional responses and health outcomes for women who have experienced IPV. This study meets the growing need to provide group programs that are innovative, strengths-based, evidence, and trauma-informed in shelter settings to facilitate personal growth, development, connection, and empowerment for survivors of IPV.

Strength-Based Group Work

The strengths-based group work component of the HAP has proven to be an effective way to help women survivors feel safe, connected, and empowered to focus on their mutual capabilities rather than their individual deficits. The strength-based approach emphasized self-determination and strengths, a way of viewing women survivors as resourceful and resilient in the face of adversity. This approach was an excellent response to the deficit-focused approaches, such as, crisis intervention or cognitive behavioral therapy that are widely used following a correction model focused on risks and needs. Focusing on strengths empowered the women to recognize and/or build on the positive characteristics they already had.

Social group work purposefully created a positive learning environment, promoting discussion, self-expression, compassion, and change amongst participants. This study has provided more insight into the HAP's ability to help adult participants connect and promote feelings of normalization, belonging, and interconnectedness. The group work successfully

created a safe environment for facilitating mindfulness. In this group, participants developed a deeper understanding of mindfulness concepts such as acceptance, compassion, connection, trust, and patience. Moreover, the peer component of group work offered a valuable supportive environment that encouraged acceptance and provided a unique opportunity to reclaim their voices and share their stories. Overall, this component of the HAP provided a unique opportunity for each woman to receive the support necessary to successfully move through the stages of change by rediscovering self-worth, reconstruction of self, countering negative self-judgment, building new healthy relationships, and receiving support in a non-judgmental environment while simultaneously discovering newfound strength, resilience, and wisdom.

Implications for Social Work

In general, for social work, exploring art-based methods, group work, and mindfulness are essential approaches and methods professionals can use to implement in their practice as holistic ways to heal or support individual and collective growth. Moreover, MBIs such as the HAP could be offered in women's shelters to empower and support survivors' mental health and well-being. Social workers could co-facilitate HAP groups with shelter support workers and placement students to be future facilitators. Additionally, social workers may consider facilitating the HAP for all shelter staff to help manage their stress or secondary trauma at work. The study findings also support the use of arts-based methods as an approach to teaching mindfulness concepts and initiating formal practice with women survivors. This could be translated into social workers facilitating MBIs within shelters-based services, as indicated earlier, to mitigate the negative effects of IPV and empower women. Alternatively, the arts-based methods could be applied as a therapeutic approach during individual counselling sessions to facilitate opportunities for self-expression and awareness with women in shelters.

Based on study findings, future research may also explore social workers delivering the HAP to adult populations; for example, it could be delivered within community-based counselling centers, local shelters, and hospitals. Further, the study results may inspire future research into the delivery of the HAP to other populations experiencing post-traumatic stress or secondary trauma, for instance, child protection workers and police. As social workers, we are frequently working with vulnerable individuals suffering from trauma. Part of our efforts to alleviate this suffering is helping in ways that promote mental health and well-being. Participating in the HAP can help vulnerable adult populations promote mental health and well-being.

Therapeutic Presence

Therapeutic presence involves being fully in the moment with a client. When social workers are present, this can provide an invitation to the client to feel met, understood, and safe, which allows for a feeling of calm, openness, and engagement in practical therapeutic work (Geller & Greenberg, 2015). Practicing mindfulness and learning mindfulness concepts cultivates presence by helping a practitioner be increasingly self-aware and self-compassionate. Consequently, learning and practicing mindfulness may help social workers to respond more effectively, working with a vulnerable population and/or in stressful situations by increasing their ability to be present and cultivating more compassion and empathy for others. These qualities support the cultivation of therapeutic presence which can promote positive helping relationships. Social workers trained in MBIs can be present with the individuals, groups, and families they work with by offering an attentive, non-judgmental space to share and be vulnerable.

Arts-Based Methods

Art-based mindfulness methods have proven to be feasible ways to help women survivors feel supported and encouraged to develop skills, improve resilience, and explore their thoughts and feelings (Teague, Hahna, & McKinney, 2006). This study has provided more insight into the HAP's ability to assist women in shelters to learn mindfulness skills and improve resilience. The arts-based methods make learning mindfulness skills accessible and engaging. These methods are trauma-informed practices in nature as they offer a useful outlet for self-expression and communication through non-verbal opportunities to express emotions that may otherwise be suppressed. Research participants described the arts-based mindfulness activities as opportunities to use their voice and share their stories that remained untold. These findings support the use of the program for individuals who could benefit from the expression of suppressed emotions from traumatic experiences.

Limitations

There are some limitations to this study. These include the study's small sample size, which limits its generalizability as findings may be specific to these particular participants. As this research involved a small number of participants, the low statistical power of the analysis compromises the researcher's ability to make an accurate judgment about the actual effect of the intervention by way of quantitative analyses. This being said, now that the results have shown the group to be suitable, relevant, and beneficial, it should be studied with larger groups of women and compared to control groups or comparison groups. For this study, efforts to obtain a greater number of participants were constrained by limited resources, scheduling of program delivery, and the availability and capacity of YWCA Genevra House. There may have been further limits to participant recruitment such as an inadequate understanding of mindfulness, and,

as a result, low confidence of potential benefits of program participation. Self-selection bias is another potential limitation as the identified population were invited to attend the program. No control group was employed in the study; therefore, another limitation is that it is non-informative on comparative effectiveness.

Another limitation would be the use of self-report measures. Despite their potential, self-report measures are an imperfect measurement, especially with regard to mindfulness (Baer, et al., 2011). Further considerations should be taken when administering the Five Facet Mindfulness Questionnaire (FFMQ) to individuals unfamiliar with the concept of mindfulness. I wonder how accurate the pre-group scores were when asking participants to respond to questions that they may not fully understand or relate to. Moreover, the timing of the post-group interviews that were conducted at the end of most residents' shelter stays may have been at a time when women had reduced levels of perceived stress due to having secured housing.

Despite these limitations, results support the use of MBIs with IPV survivors and reveal the playful and engaging nature of an emerging arts-based MBI that may increase participation, reduce attrition, and improve the accessibility of mindfulness. These preliminary findings could be further explored by conducting further research studying the delivery of the HAP with women IPV survivors but including larger sample sizes, a control group, and conducting longitudinal studies.

Recommendations

From these research findings, several recommendations can be made for the future implementation of this arts-based mindfulness program in this setting. In the recruiting stage, available childcare and transportation for women interested in the program was a barrier to participation. Having childcare available on-site and transportation for women now living in the

community can ensure equal opportunity for future participants. Program modifications can also be made to ensure meditation practices are trauma-informed. For instance, throughout the program, for we offered grounding meditations instead of body scans considering some women survived physical and sexual abuse. Although body scans can be useful in becoming present, anchored in our bodies, and in noticing places that might need attention, it can also be triggering (reminders) of traumatic events for people whose bodies have been violated. Program delivery is another area that could benefit from future considerations. The 12-week program timing should aim to be more aligned with women's shelter stay, which is on average 3-months. This did not affect attendance as participants who established housing before the end of the HAP returned to the shelter for the group. Nevertheless, it would be more convenient for participants if they were made aware of the program during their initial intake process. This way, both timelines could potentially run more parallel to one another.

In the group, since the participants demonstrated a keen desire to share more of their experiences of the activities during the sessions, recommendations to incorporate fewer activities into each session would allow more time for group discussions. More data could have collected from participants by way of brief semi-structured interviews at six weeks. A considerable amount of data was collected from one individual interview conducted with Marilyn pre-group as she was not able to attend the group interview. Individual interviews conducted as an alternative to the group interviews could potentially enhance the collection of data. Another consideration would be to send completed transcripts to participants to see if the transcriptions accurately represented their experiences and to offer an opportunity to add additional information if so desired. During the first phases of thematic analysis, the establishment of initial themes could have also been sent to participants to be reviewed for their feedback or perceived accuracy

of themes or participants could have been brought together to discuss the preliminary analysis. This additional data may have provided more insight into the development of the group and the experiences of participants that were not noticed or evident during program delivery.

Conclusion

Some researchers support the use of mindfulness-based interventions with survivors of IPV (Dutton, Bermudez, Matas, Majid, & Myers, 2013; Gallegos, Cross, & Pigeon, 2015; Kimbrough, Magyari, Langenberg, Chesney, & Berman, 2010; Smith, 2009). This study contributes to social work practice by offering further insight into the suitability and benefits of HAP as a beneficial and suitable MBI for abused women to help mitigate the adverse effects of IPV. Moreover, this research initiates the opportunity for dialogue into the value of integrating mindfulness training within the shelter setting or adapting it as an educational intervention led by support workers in shelters. MBIs for women survivors of IPV may be considered a viable way to prevent the adverse effects of IPV, and for the promotion of healing and empowerment. Finally, this research contributes to the growing body of literature exploring MBIs in emergency shelters for women fleeing IPV and MBIs specifically in a northern Ontario context.

Results of this investigation into the two groups studied to demonstrate that participation in an arts-based mindfulness group program helped women understand the negative impacts that intimate partner violence (IPV) had on themselves and others. Some of these findings are supported by previous research that suggests delivering mindfulness-based interventions to vulnerable populations had many benefits. Also, consistent with existent findings, as indicated earlier, is the use of arts-based MBIs as a way to educate vulnerable populations in mindfulness concepts. Moreover, all participants suggested the arts-based approach to learning mindfulness was creative and played an integral role in supporting their participation in the program.

These findings speak to the suitability and benefits of this emerging approach for women survivors of IPV. The delivery of this intervention in violence against women (VAW) shelters is recommended with some modifications that ensure activities are trauma-informed. These recommendations are in alignment with research findings that suggest mindfulness-based interventions offer benefits for emerging adults and support recommendations that we find effective ways to empower women as they enter shelters in the community. Additional research exploring the delivery of the HAP to women survivors of IPV in VAW shelters would serve to support the findings and to determine further if any program adjustments or modifications would be beneficial for this specific population. While my interpretation of the results is restricted by my worldview and the small size of the women participants, given the findings, it seems reasonable to conduct future research with a larger sample size to guide a more wide-scale implementation of this program with adult women, survivors of IPV living in VAW shelters across Canada.

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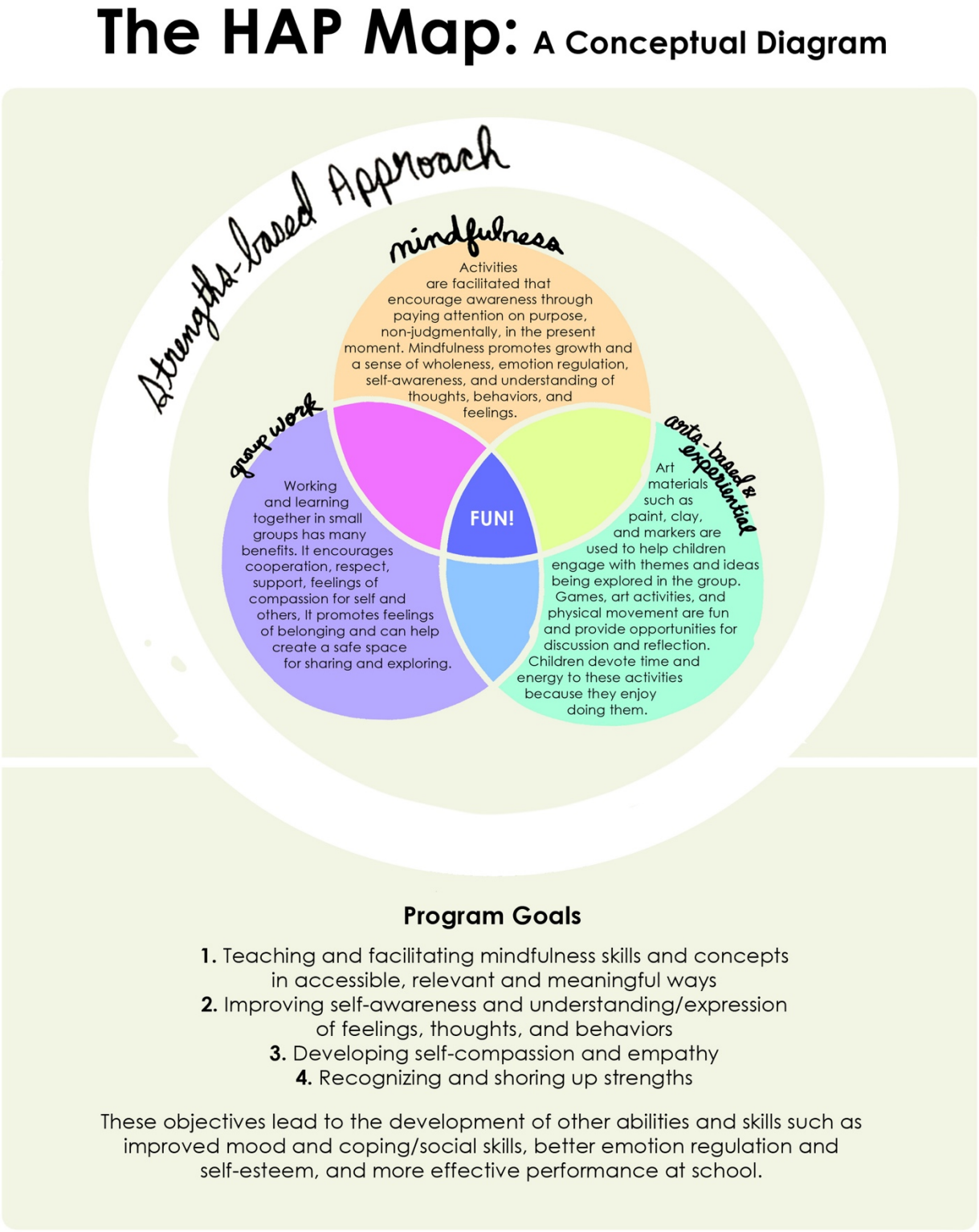
APPENDICES

APPENDIX A: HAP CONCEPTUAL MAP



APPENDIX B: INFORMATION HANDOUT

INFORMATION ABOUT THE ARTS-BASED MINDFULNESS GROUP PROGRAM

Mindfulness is the awareness that emerges by paying attention on purpose, in the present moment, non-judgmentally, to moment-by-moment experiences (Kabat-Zinn, 1990). Mindfulness-based interventions (MBIs) have been shown to improve sleep, self-esteem, focus, attention, self-awareness, self-compassion, self- regulation, emotional regulation and empathy. MBIs help with a variety of challenges such as stress, anxiety, and depression.

Holistic Arts-Based Program (HAP)

Dr. Diana Coholic (School of social work) and her colleagues have developed a 12-week mindfulness program called Holistic Arts-Based Program (HAP). HAP uses a combination of art-based methods and mindfulness-based practices in a group format. HAP was originally developed for vulnerable youth and children. Dr. Coholic and her colleagues have found that participants of the program have reported benefits in emotional regulation, mood, increased self-esteem, empathy, the ability to pay attention and focus and cope better at home and school.

Potential Benefits for You

Your participation in HAP will involve fun arts-based group activities that are strengths-based, and engaging. You will learn about mindfulness and gain competences to better manage your own stress. You may become more self- aware, experience increased self-esteem and an enhanced sense of psychological well-being. You may enhance your ability to be mindful, including learning how to pay attention and focus, identify and explore your feelings, thoughts and behaviors, and recognize and develop your strengths.

Resources

A short film was made with University Education Students who have participated in the HAP program to demonstrate their experiences. The film can be viewed by inserting the link into your web browser: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=incBp8LzX_o

Details

You will participate in a 12- week mindfulness group for two hours a week beginning in the fall of 2018. You will be invited to participate in an interview before and after the group. During the interview, you will be asked to answer a series of questions and be asked to answer some scaling questions pertaining to your stress and mindfulness. This interview will be a maximum of half an hour. If you are set to leave the shelter before the program ends you can still come back for group.

We have room for 15 women to participate. For more information and to secure a spot in this program please ask Stephanie McMahon or email smcmahon@laurentian.ca

APPENDIX C: POSTERS DISPLAYED

APPENDIX D: THOUGHTS JAR ACTIVITY

THOUGHTS JAR

PURPOSE

Thoughts Jar teaches the concept of mindfulness. It symbolizes how we feel when we have many thoughts and feelings all swirling around in our minds versus how we feel when our minds are calmer and more focused (when the objects have settled to the bottom of the jar).

HOW TO

1. Use a clear glass jar half-filled with water.

2. Take various shaped and coloured beads, which represent thoughts and feelings, and drop them into the jar one by one saying out loud what each bead represents.

3. Everyone can take a turn shaking the jar.

LEARNING

With a calm mind and self-awareness, we can make better choices and decisions rather than reacting because of a feeling.

THE EXPERIENCE

"Thoughts Jar lets me show my feelings to my friends and family"

"Thoughts Jar teaches me to wait for my mind to settle before I react"

"Holistic Arts-Based Program (HAP)" www.dianacoholic.com

APPENDIX E: PAINTING ON A LINE ACTIVITY

PAINTING ON A LINE

PURPOSE

Painting on a line teaches not to focus on the final product but instead the process of doing something creative and having fun.

HOW TO

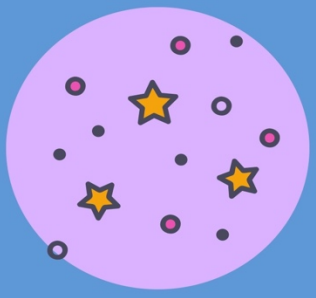
1. A line of string is hung in the room.

2. One piece of paper for each group member is hung from the line with clothespins.

3. The participants are encouraged to paint something without holding the paper with their hands.

LEARNING

Connections can be made about adapting your expectations in a challenging situation and the importance of being in the present moment.



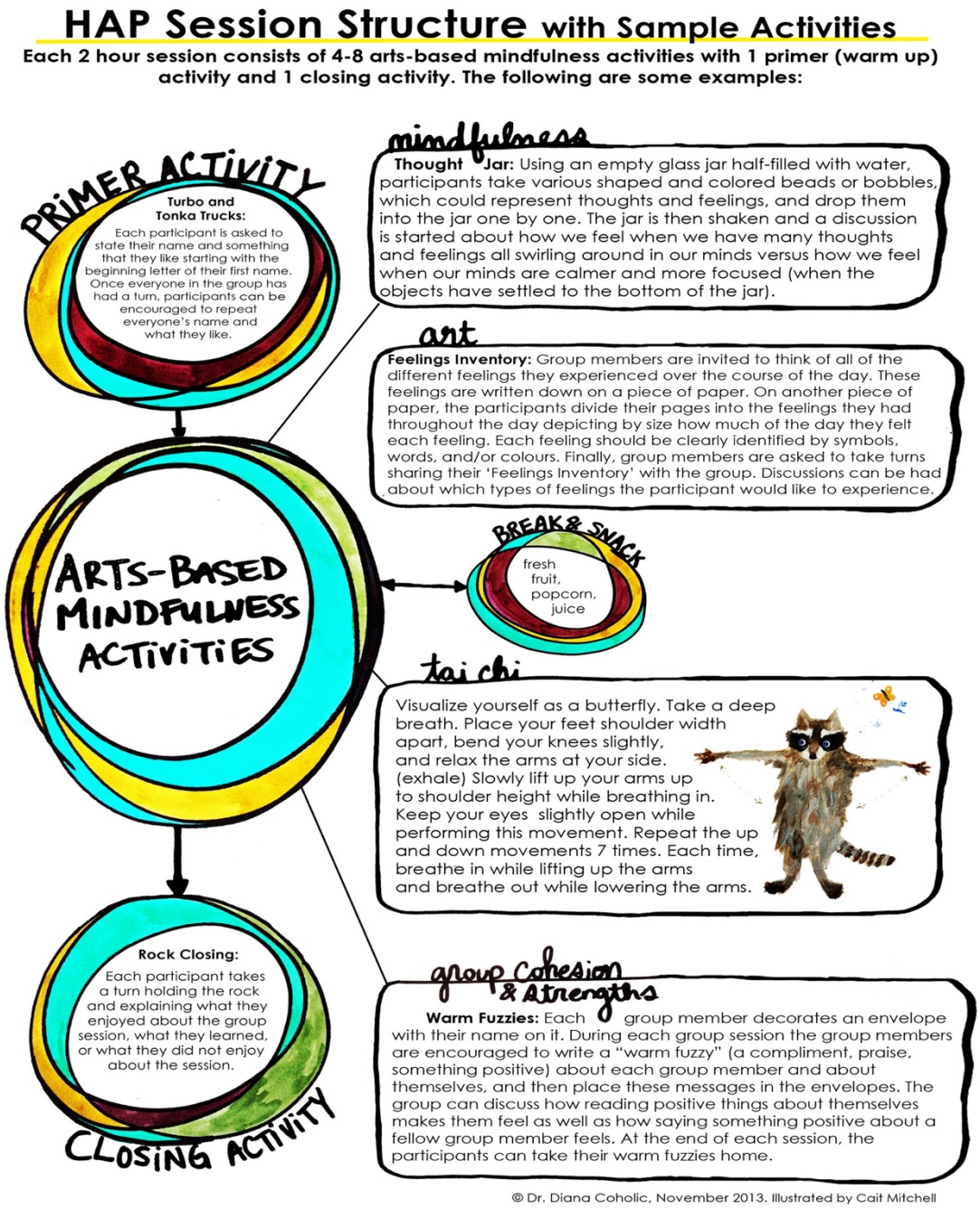
THE EXPERIENCE

"Painting on a line lets me have fun making a mess"

"Painting on a line teaches me to be in the moment"

"Holistic Arts-Based Program (HAP)" www.dianacoholic.com

APPENDIX F: HAP SESSION STRUCTURE



[c] Retrieved from http://www.dianacoholic.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/07/HAPsession.pdf

Five Examples of HAP Activities

Thought Jar
Goal: Introduce the concept of mindfulness
Description: Using an empty glass jar half-filled with water, participants took various shaped and colored beads, which could represent thoughts and feelings, and dropped them into the jar one by one. Individual jars or one group jar were used. The participants were invited to take turns swirling and shaking the jar(s). Discussion focused on how we feel distracted when we have many thoughts and feelings all swirling around in our minds at once versus how we feel when our minds are calmer and more focused Mindfulness was introduced as a practice that can help us keep our minds clearer and calm. With self-awareness, we can make better choices and decisions rather than acting out a feeling.

Me as a Tree
Goal: Develop self- awareness & learning about other group members (promoting empathy & diversity)
Description: Each of the participants drew themselves as a tree. Everyone can draw a tree, but everyone's trees will always be different. Instructions can be kept loose, or the facilitators can ask the participants to think about what the tree would look like and what might be around it. By representing oneself as a tree, it enabled the participants to talk about themselves in a more comfortable manner as an introductory activity. The facilitators also discussed the diversity in the group (how the trees were different) and how this was a strength.

Change 5
Goal: Practicing mindful awareness by paying attention to each other's physical appearance
Description: Each group member was encouraged to leave the group room with a facilitator and while outside the room to change five things about their appearance. Some examples were taking off glasses, rolling up pants and sleeves, changing a hairstyle, and removing shoes. When the group members returned to the room, everyone else had to guess what changes were made. A discussion was had about our awareness and how when we pay greater attention, and we may notice more things in our environment.

Emotion Listen & Draw
Goal: Discuss how different types of music evoke feelings; pay mindful attention to thoughts & feelings
Description: Before the group, five short segments of music were recorded on a CD (approximately two minutes each). Each group member was provided with five sheets of paper. They were instructed to number their pages from 1 to 5. Next, the children listened to each piece of music and quickly drew/painted the feeling that they were experiencing while listening to the song. It was most useful to have five very different songs to ensure that a variety of emotions were evoked by the music.

Bad Day Better
Goal: To discuss how mindful people do not avoid difficult feelings but learn how to experience and express these in helpful ways (developing self- compassion).
Description: Each participant was provided with an 8x10 piece of paper, which was folded in half. On the left side of the page, each participant was asked to paint what a 'bad day' looks like. Once this picture was completed, they were asked to fold their paper and press down on the painted picture, which created a mirror image on the right side of the page. Next, each participant decorated the right side to turn it into a 'good day.' When this picture was completed, the paper was folded again and pressed together which created a large picture of a good day. After the bad day had been made better, each group member discussed and explained their painting to the group.

Coholic, D., & Eys, M. (2016). Benefits of an arts-based mindfulness group intervention for vulnerable children. Child and Adolescent Social Work Journal, 33(1), 1-13. doi: 10.1007/s10560-015-0431-3

APPENDIX G: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Pre-Group Interview Guide

1- Can you tell me why you signed up for this program?
2- What are your expectations of the program?
3- Have you ever participated in a group work before?
4- If so, what was your experience?
5- What are some of your daily stressors?
6- What do you do to cope or manage stress?
7- Have you ever heard about mindfulness? and if so, what do you think it is, and how do you think it could help you?
8- Do you have any concerns or worries about participating in the group?

Post-Group Interview Guide

Photographs of the participants' artworks will be accessible during the post-group interviews.

1. In reviewing the body of work you created during this group, can you tell me about what some of the pieces mean to you or about what you've created?

• What here has the most meaning to you?

2. What has been your experience in participating in this holistic arts-based group?

3. Which of the art exercises did you find most helpful, and the most challenging?

• In what ways?

4. Did you find this group helpful in your recent experience in coping with stress?

• In what ways?

5. Did you learn anything about yourself when participating in the group or creating the art?

APPENDIX H: PERCIEVED STRESS SCALE (PSS)

The questions in this scale ask you about your feelings and thoughts during the last month. In each case, you will be
asked to indicate by circling how often you felt or thought a certain way.
Name: _____ Date: ____
Age: _____ Gender (Circle): M F Other _____

0 = Never 1 = Almost Never 2 = Sometimes 3 = Fairly Often 4 = Very Often

1. In the last month, how often have you been upset
because of something that happened unexpectedly?..... 0 1 2 3 4
2. In the last month, how often have you felt that you were unable
to control the important things in your life? 0 1 2 3 4
3. In the last month, how often have you felt nervous and "stressed"? 0 1 2 3 4
4. In the last month, how often have you felt confident about your ability
to handle your personal problems? 0 1 2 3 4
5. In the last month, how often have you felt that things
were going your way?..... 0 1 2 3 4
6. In the last month, how often have you found that you could not cope
with all the things that you had to do? 0 1 2 3 4
7. In the last month, how often have you been able
to control irritations in your life?..... 0 1 2 3 4
8. In the last month, how often have you felt that you were on top of things?..... 0 1 2 3 4
9. In the last month, how often have you been angered
because of things that were outside of your control?..... 0 1 2 3 4
10. In the last month, how often have you felt difficulties
were piling up so high that you could not overcome them? 0 1 2 3 4

Please feel free to use the Perceived Stress Scale for your research.

Mind Garden, Inc.
info@mindgarden.com
www.mindgarden.com

References

The PSS Scale is reprinted with permission of the American Sociological Association, from Cohen, S., Kamarck, T., and Mermelstein, R. (1983).
A global measure of perceived stress. Journal of Health and Social Behavior, 24, 386-396.Cohen, S. and Williamson, G. Perceived Stress in a
Probability Sample of the United States. Spacapan, S. and Oskamp, S. (Eds.) The Social Psychology of Health. Newbury Park, CA: Sage, 1988.

APPENDIX I: FIVE FACET MINDFULNESS QUESTIONNAIRE (FFMQ)

This instrument is based on a factor analytic study of five independently developed mindfulness questionnaires. The analysis yielded five factors that appear to represent elements of mindfulness as it is currently conceptualized. The five facets are observing, describing, acting with awareness, non-judging of inner experience, and non-reactivity to inner experience.

Please rate each of the following statements using the scale provided. Write the number in the blank that best describes your own opinion of what is generally true for you.

1	2	3	4	5
Never or very rarely true	Rarely true	Sometimes true	Often true	Very often or always true

1.When I'm walking, I deliberately notice the sensations of my body moving.
2. I'm good at finding words to describe my feelings.
3.I criticize myself for having irrational or inappropriate emotions.
4.I perceive my feelings and emotions without having to react to them.
5.When I do things, my mind wanders off and I'm easily distracted.
6.When I take a shower or bath, I stay alert to the sensations of water on my body.
7. I can easily put my beliefs, opinions, and expectations into words.
8.I don't pay attention to what I'm doing because I'm daydreaming, worrying, or otherwise distracted.
9.I watch my feelings without getting lost in them.
10. I tell myself I shouldn't be feeling the way I'm feeling.
11. I notice how foods and drinks affect my thoughts, bodily sensations, and emotions.
12. It's hard for me to find the words to describe what I'm thinking.
13. I am easily distracted.
14. I believe some of my thoughts are abnormal or bad and I shouldn't think that way.
15.I pay attention to sensations, such as the wind in my hair or sun on my face.
16. I have trouble thinking of the right words to express how I feel about things.
17.I make judgments about whether my thoughts are good or bad.
18.I find it difficult to stay focused on what's happening in the present.
19. When I have distressing thoughts or images, I "step back" and am aware of the thought or image without getting taken over by it.
20. I pay attention to sounds, such as clocks ticking, birds chirping, or cars passing.
21. In difficult situations, I can pause without immediately reacting.

22.When I have a sensation in my body, it's difficult for me to describe it because I can't find the right words.
23.It seems I am "running on automatic" without much awareness of what I'm doing.
24.When I have distressing thoughts or images, I feel calm soon after.
25. I tell myself that I shouldn't be thinking the way I'm thinking.
26.I notice the smells and aromas of things.
27.Even when I'm feeling terribly upset, I can find a way to put it into words.
28.I rush through activities without being really attentive to them.
29.When I have distressing thoughts or images I am able just to notice them without reacting.
30.I think some of my emotions are bad or inappropriate and I shouldn't feel them.
31.I notice visual elements in art or nature, such as colors, shapes, textures, or patterns of light and shadow.
32.My natural tendency is to put my experiences into words.
33.When I have distressing thoughts or images, I just notice them and let them go.
34.I do jobs or tasks automatically without being aware of what I'm doing.
35.When I have distressing thoughts or images, I judge myself as good or bad, depending what the thought/image is about.
36.I pay attention to how my emotions affect my thoughts and behavior.
37. I can usually describe how I feel at the moment in considerable detail.
38.I find myself doing things without paying attention.
39.I disapprove of myself when I have irrational ideas.

Scoring Information:

Observe items: 1, 6, 11, 15, 20, 26, 31, 36
Describe items: 2, 7, 12R, 16R, 22R, 27, 32, 37
Act with Awareness items: 5R, 8R, 13R, 18R, 23R, 28R, 34R, 38R
Non-judge items: 3R, 10R, 14R, 17R, 25R, 30R, 35R, 39R
Non-react items: 4, 9, 19, 21, 24, 29, 33

Baer, R. A., Smith, G. T., Hopkins, J., Krietemeyer, J., & Toney, L. (2006). Using self- report assessment methods to explore facets of mindfulness. *Assessment, 13*, 27- 45.

APPENDIX J: ETHICS APPROVAL

LaurentianUniversity
UniversitéLaurentienne

APPROVAL FOR CONDUCTING RESEARCH INVOLVING HUMAN SUBJECTS
Research Ethics Board – Laurentian University

This letter confirms that the research project identified below has successfully passed the ethics review by the Laurentian University Research Ethics Board (REB). Your ethics approval date, other milestone dates, and any special conditions for your project are indicated below.

TYPE OF APPROVAL / New **X** / Modifications to project / Time extension	
Name of Principal Investigator and school/department	Stephanie McMahon (PI) Faculty of Health/School of Social Work; Diana Coholic & Leigh MacEwan (Supervisors)
Title of Project	Exploring Abused Women's Experience in the Holistic Arts-Based Program
REB file number	6013849
Date of original approval of project	July 9, 2018
Date of approval of project modifications or extension *(if applicable)*	
Final/Interim report due on: *(You may request an extension)*	July 9, 2019
Conditions placed on project	

During the course of your research, no deviations from, or changes to, the protocol, recruitment or consent forms may be initiated without prior written approval from the REB. If you wish to modify your research project, please refer to the Research Ethics website to complete the appropriate REB form.

All projects must submit a report to REB at least once per year. If involvement with human participants continues for longer than one year (e.g. you have not completed the objectives of the study and have not yet terminated contact with the participants, except for feedback of final results to participants), you must request an extension using the appropriate LU REB form. In all cases, please ensure that your research complies with Tri-Council Policy Statement (TCPS). Also please quote your REB file number on all future correspondence with the REB office.

Congratulations and best wishes in conducting your research.

Susan Boyko, PhD, Vice Chair, *Laurentian University Research Ethics Board*

APPENDIX K: INFORMED CONSENT FORMS

LaurentianUniversity UniversitéLaurentienne

Participant Informed Consent Form

Study Title: Exploring Abused Women's Experiences in the Holistic Arts-Based Program

Investigator: Stephanie McMahon, B.S.W., MSW Student.

Thesis Supervisors:
Drs. Diana Coholic & Leigh MacEwan
Laurentian University School of Social Work
dcoholic@laurentian.ca, 705-675-1151ext. 5053
lmacewan@laurentian.ca, 705-675-1151 ext. 5059

Stephanie McMahon is a student in the Master of Social Work program at Laurentian University and she is exploring the experiences of women (who have escaped abusive relationships) in a holistic arts-based support group. We are interested to know how helpful the holistic arts-based program is for women who have experienced abuse. HAP (Holistic Arts-Based Program) is a strengths-based program to develop mindfulness skills and resilience. The goals of HAP include learning mindfulness, improving self-awareness, developing more effective coping strategies, and building strengths. If you agree to take part in this program, you will:

- Come to 12 meetings of the arts-based group program (every week, you will take part in a 2-hour group session for 12-weeks in total). The group will be held at Genevra House.You committing to the 12 weeks does not require you to stay at Genevra House for the full 12 weeks. Residents that have left the shelter after committing to the program can come back for group.

- Meet with a research team member before the program starts to fill out 2 short tests that will help us understand how mindful and stressed you are. We will ask you to do these tests one more time after you have completed the program. By doing these tests, we can see if there are any changes over time.

- Before the program and after the program is done, we will want to talk to you in a group setting about your experience in our program and if the program has helped you to cope better. These group interviews will take approximately 30-45 minutes of your time and will help us understand what you liked and didn't like about the program, which will help us make the program better for other future participants.

The group interviews will be audio-recorded. This will allow me to transcribe (type out) the interview for the purposes of understanding the conversation. You should know that discussing your viewpoints may cause some anxiety and/or fatigue. You may request a break at any time during the interview process.

☐ check here if you agree to the audio-recording of your voice in the group interviews

We hope that by taking part in our program will help you to learn about yourself, to feel better about yourself, and built mindfulness skills to cope better with daily stresses. Other benefits of this program could be improved self-awareness, mood, and ability to deal with your feelings. It may also help reduce stress and feelings of anxiety. Moreover, the program can help you to better understand your thoughts, feelings and behaviours, and judge yourself less.

When you come to the group, you might feel nervous or shy, or have other feelings. If you ever become upset, you can let Stephanie know and she can signal the shelter support on site to support you. Or you can even call the Assaulted Women's Helpline **at** 1-866-863-0511 or the 24-hour Crisis Intervention Line in Sudbury at 705-675-4760. You will have lots of chances in the group to talk about what you think and feel, and it's important to talk with someone after the group too if you feel you need to do that. You should not talk about other group members' experiences with anyone outside of the group, but you can talk about your own experience to whomever you want. We cannot guarantee confidentiality if other participants speak outside the group.

We want you to know that taking part in the group is your decision and no one is forcing you to be involved. Taking part in this group or deciding not to take part in this group, will have no influence on the supports you're receiving from Genevra House. We don't want you to do anything that you don't want to do. We only want women in the program who really want to be involved. Your involvement in HAP does not replace other services you might be involved in. If you decide to be part of the program, and then later change your mind, then you can stop coming. If you stop coming, we will keep the information we already collected. All of the information that we collect will be kept confidential (that means that only people who are part of the research team can see the information that we collect) and everything will be locked up by Dr. Coholic in F-534a (Fraser Building) at Laurentian University.

Eventually, this information will be destroyed. We will want other people to know about the groups so that other women can take part in a program like this too, but when we tell people about our work with you, we will never give anyone information so that they would know who you are. For example, we might use a picture of one of your arts-based creations to show other people what we do in the group: Dr. Coholic and members of her team present our work to other researchers and people who work with others, and the pictures help people better understand what we're doing in the group. We would like you to take your arts-based creations with you, but we would like to take pictures of some of them for our records.

☐ check here if you agree that we can take pictures of your arts-based creations

Please note that information collected for the purpose of this research study will be kept secure and confidential. However, there are some specific cases in which your confidentiality cannot be protected: (a) if you intend to harm yourself; (b) if you intend to harm someone else; (c) if there is reasonable suspicion that a child up to the age of 16 years old is at risk of neglect, abuse, or witnessing parental violence, we are required by law to report this to the Children's Aid Society immediately.

If you have any questions at any time, you can leave Stephanie a message at the front desk at Genevra House or email her at smcmahon@laurentian.ca.

If anyone has any questions about the ethics of this research, you can contact the **Research Ethics Officer,** at **Laurentian University Research Office, telephone: 705-675-1151 extension 3213 or 2436 or toll free at 1-800-461-4030 or email ethics@laurentian.ca.**

By signing this form, you agree to take part in our program and you're letting us know that you understand everything on this form. You will get a copy of this form that you can keep.

Participant's Signature: _____ Date: _____

APPENDIX L: COMMUNITY SUPPORT SERVICES

Assaulted Women's Helpline
24-hour telephone crisis line
1.866.863.0511

Crisis Intervention
Counseling
Treatment Services
705.675 4760

Voices for Women Sudbury Sexual Assault Centre
96 Larch Street
705.671.5495

The National Domestic Violence Hotline
1−800−799−7233

Sudbury Counselling Centre
VAW (Violence Against Women)
Individual/Family Counseling
705.524.9629

Inner City Home of Sudbury
Crisis Counselling
Resource Advocacy Support
Emergency Food Bank
705.675.7550

Violence Intervention and Prevention Program (VIPP)
Health Sciences North
41 Ramsey Lake Road

Child and Family Centre (CFC)
Mental Health services to children and youth
705.525.1008

Centre for Addiction and Mental Health
24/7 Psychiatric Emergency Service
705.675.119